

**Persian Literature from Homoeroticism to  
Representations of the LGBT Community: an  
Introduction**

## **Introduction**

This overview is the result of a six-month research project which was made possible by the support of Outright (formerly the LGLHRC).

This research stems from a personal interest both in classical and contemporary Persian literature. I am particularly fascinated by how the young generation of contemporary Iranian writers express their sexuality through the medium of writing. I believe that my project, while it merely skims the surface of the complex history of representations of the LGBT community in Persian literature, is a small yet important step towards understanding the new, re-created and re-constructed Iranian non-heterosexual identity.

I hope that the fruits of my labour can stimulate discussion and debate both inside Iran and outside and very much look forward to reading responses and feedback.

I would like to thank my beloved husband, without his unconditional love and support, I would not have been able to finish this project. I would like to dedicate this work to my good friend Zeinab Peyghambarzadeh.

**Anahita Hosseini-Lewis, Sheffield, December 2015**

## Background

Same-sex relationships were widespread in Iranian society until the late Qajar dynasty and the Constitutional Revolution of 1906.<sup>1</sup> These sexual and emotional relationships are widely reflected in classic Persian literature – particularly its popular and dominant form, poetry, which is rich in male homoeroticism. According to Sirus Shamisa, the renowned Iranian literature critic and author of *Homoeroticism in Persian Literature*, “Persian (lyrical) literature is essentially a homosexual literature”. In this chapter, I will explore the roots of homoerotica in Persian literature and outline the background and features of this phenomenon.

## Ancient Persia and the Zoroastrians: the Absence of Homoeroticism and the Presence of Homophobia

There are currently no remaining sources of homoerotic literature from the pre-Islamic period. This is due to several reasons: first of all, intact texts from that period are extremely small in number. Many libraries and books were destroyed during and after the Arab invasion by the new sovereigns. Simultaneously, pre-Islamic Iranic languages and dialects such as Pahlavi, Middle Persian and others were eventually replaced by Dari Farsi, with the old alphabets discarded and replaced by the Arabic alphabet.

In the recent past, some Iranian historians, literature critics and activists (often demonstrating homophobic attitudes and nationalist tendencies), have suggested that same-sex relationships/homosexuality stems solely from the Iranians’ encounter with foreign cultures or religions, such as those of the Greeks, Turks or Islam.<sup>2</sup> A quick Farsi Google search with the keywords ‘homoeroticism and Persian literature’ or ‘homosexuality in ancient Persian culture’ will bring up various literary sites and blogs boldly proclaiming that there are no traces of homosexuality in Iran’s ‘glorious’ past, and that such ‘deviations’ result from the Iranian people coming into contact with alien cultures. From this point of view, which unfortunately seems to be quite common, homosexuality is seen as something

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<sup>1</sup> Franke 2009.

<sup>2</sup> This point of view is comparable with the Arab outlook that Josef Massad has documented in his book *Desiring Arabs*, where he mentions similar efforts on the part of some Arab scholars to try to prove that same-sex relationships were ‘an abomination of the Persians, who transmitted it to the Arabs’ (Massad 2007, p. 227).

along the lines of a virus that can be contracted through exposure to others. The prime suspects for spreading this disease are the Greeks and the 'Turks', with claims that same-sex relationships were introduced as a result of the Turkish tribes invading Iran in the 11th century (around the 5th AH century in the Islamic lunar calendar). These claims, which obviously lack academic and scientific foundations, exploit the lack of available research or documents on this period and do not present any counter-evidence that would substantiate such a historical interpretation.

The lack of documentation of homoerotic literature in ancient Persia, however, by no means should imply that homoerotic literature from that era is completely absent. For example, we do have evidence of the presence of same-sex relationships (also in form of two consenting adults) in Zoroastrian religious sources, namely the severe punishment of homosexual practices in its scripture books, which suggest that the practice was sufficiently common to be targeted so severely.

Aside from the hostility of Zoroastrian scripture towards consensual male homosexuality, the practice of same-sex relations in the form of an unequal power relation has been documented in the royal courts of the Achaemenid Empire (ca. 550-330 BC). Pierre Briant, the author of *From Cyrus to Alexander*, notes that Cyrus the Younger was in love with a eunuch named Tiridates, who later joined Artaxerxes the Second of Persia, who also fell in love with him. When Tiridates died "still a youth emerging from childhood", the king declared three days of public mourning throughout Asia.<sup>3</sup> Such examples provide sufficient evidence that not only were same-sex relationships not alien to the pre-Islamic culture of Iran, but that the particular form they assumed (that is to say, loving a socially-economically inferior adolescent male/child) was either a common pattern of same-sex relations throughout Iranian history, or at the very least that it resurfaced again in the 11th century, finding extensive expression in classic Persian literature of the time.

It is a Zoroasterianist belief that same-sex relations emerged as a result of Ahriman, the destructive Spirit – the Lord of Lies – who is broadly comparable to the Devil or Satan in Abrahamic religions. In his bid to destroy the world, Ahriman engaged in an act of self-sodomy, which immediately led to an explosion of the forces of evil from him, leading to the

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<sup>3</sup> Briant, 2002, p. 269.

birth of all vices. Male same-sex relations (consummated by the act of anal penetration or *Kun-Marz* in Middle Persian) are the Pandora's Box of Zoroastrianism and in its religious texts, such as Avesta and Videvdads, they are punishable by death.<sup>4 5</sup>

Other Zoroastrian sources, besides official religious scripture, further explore same-sex relations in ancient Persia. One of them is Arda-wiraf Nameh (or Ardā Wirāz-nāmag, a letter written by Saint Wiraf – a Zoroasterian priest and saint). A further source is a book from the late Sassanid period, which is interestingly very similar to Dante's trilogy *The Divine Comedy*. The book tells the story of a *Mobed* (a Zoroasterian priest) named Kirdir, who experiences a Miraj (heavenly ascension) during which he offers testimony of what goes on in the Zoroastrian version of heaven and hell.

The very first sin he encounters in hell is sodomy. The dark imagination of the writers at that time, which makes the torture featured in Pasolini's 1976 movie *Salo, or 120 days of Sodom* seem tender by comparison) goes on to recall that the passive performer of anal sex (u-š mard abar xwēš tan hišt) will be punished by having a snake the size of a wooden beam inserted into his rectum so far that it will come out of his mouth<sup>6</sup>.

It is important to note that the initial laws regarding male homosexuality in Zoroastrianism seem to be solely targeting sexual relationships between two male adults. In later periods, however, the laws differentiate between same-sex relationships between two consenting adults and the rape of a young boy by an adult man. The laws insist on the death penalty for homosexuality and consider pederasty to be a minor sin in comparison (15 times less sinful, to be exact)<sup>7</sup>.

We have established that same-sex relations did exist in one form or another in ancient Persia, yet the fact remains that homoerotica is absent from texts that have been preserved from this period. As mentioned before, this absence is not necessarily because such literature did not exist. It was either not well-documented due to a fear of punishment by

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<sup>4</sup> [http://www.religioustolerance.org/hom\\_zor.htm](http://www.religioustolerance.org/hom_zor.htm)

<sup>5</sup> In *Homosexuality and Government, Politics and Prison* (1992) Wayne Dynes has suggested that Jewish legal prohibition of same-sex practices stems from the Zoroastrian faith.

<sup>6</sup> From: <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/homosexuality-i> and [https://www.academia.edu/2438649/Visions\\_of\\_Heaven\\_and\\_Hell\\_in\\_Late\\_Antiquity\\_The\\_Case\\_of\\_Arda\\_Wiraz\\_Namag](https://www.academia.edu/2438649/Visions_of_Heaven_and_Hell_in_Late_Antiquity_The_Case_of_Arda_Wiraz_Namag)

<http://titus.uni-frankfurt.de/texte/etcs/iran/miran/mpers/arda/arda.htm>

<sup>7</sup> Floor, 2010, 251.

the Zoroastrian authorities, or it was most probably destroyed either during and after the Arab invasion or as a result of later neglect due to the change of language and a lack of interest for its translation into Farsi or Arabic (which was how many of the Middle Persian and Pahlavi texts were saved from ultimate destruction). Things were not at all helped by the fact that most of these translators who preserved ancient documents were Iranians who had not abandoned their ancestor's faith, especially Zoroastrian priests. They would naturally refrain from translating any sources that contained homoerotic material.

### **Iran in the Islamic era: From Romanticism to Homoerotic Sufi Love**

The first centuries after the Arabs invaded the lands we know as Iran were followed by a period of general confusion, adaptation and later identity building – especially in the Farsi-speaking sections of the country. Around the turn of the millennium (1000 AD), two distinct literary trends had formed, both of which had a different understanding of love and sexual relations. The one group of poets valued heterosexual/opposite-sex relationships and the other initiated the literary tradition of homoerotic love and same-sex relationships. This latter trend eventually overcame the first and dominated Persian lyrical poetry for almost a millennium.

The first trend was initiated by the epic poet Abulghasem Ferdowsi (935-1025 CE) (who has been compared to the Greek Homer in terms of his important role in documenting Ancient Persian Mythology, as well as for his construction of a Persian identity) and the lyrical poet Nezami e Ganjavi (1141-1209 CE). Both of these poets use poetry as a medium of storytelling, and both draw the majority of their work from pre-Islamic Pahlavi and Middle Persian sources. Unlike most of the pioneers of homoerotic poetry, neither of these poets exhibits an interest in describing the act of sex and sexual relations; instead they both tend to focus on the romantic aspect, especially Nezami e Ganjavi. By comparison, Ferdowsi is less interested in 'Love' *per se*. This lack of interest is not uncommon for an epic poet, but in many instances he even skips over the romantic aspect of a heterosexual relationship, portraying it more as a matter of convenience than anything else. (In order to provide the reader who is unfamiliar with classic Persian poetry with an impression of his work, we can say that if Ferdowsi's stories were to be adapted as Disney movies then there would be very little need for the stories to be changed). The most romantic aspects of his poetry, such as

the love story of Bijan and Manijeh, came in *Shahnameh* (his masterpiece), which he supposedly composed in his youth.

Nezami's lovers are comparable to those in classic Western literature, such as Shakespeare's characters Romeo and Juliet. Most of Nezami's love stories are inspired by ancient Persian characters (for example the Lovers in his renowned *Khosrow and Shirin* are the Sassanid King Khosrow and the Armenian Princess Shirin.) Although Nezami's poems do not feature homoerotic love, they exhibit another tendency which later became entangled with homoerotic love in Persian literature, namely the mystical characteristics and potentials of love. In his book *Leili and Majnoun*, the young Arab lover Majnoun becomes acquainted with a greater love (i.e. the love of God) through his love of Leili. This mystical potential of earthly love is also manifested in Sufi-influenced poetry, where the famous 'beloved' was often a young and beautiful boy/adolescent youth who was believed to be a *Shahed* (witness) of Allah's mightiness.

Again, as was the case with same-sex relations in ancient Persia, the lack of documentation of homoerotic love by no means implies the absence of same-sex relationships in the first centuries after Islam and before the Turkish sovereigns took power. Indeed, evidence for the very presence of erotica could also be extracted from the works of the two significant poets we just discussed: Nezami and Ferdowsi.

In his long *Masnavi Makhzan al-Asrar* (*Treasury of Mysteries*), Nezami depicts his disgust for certain kinds of men:

*He's thrown away the scripture and the sword*

*Replaced it with goblets and flasks*

*He with a mirror in one hand and a comb in another*

*Who, like women, takes pride in his dress ...'.<sup>8</sup>*

He goes on to explain how such men are an embarrassment to manhood and are even less worthy than women. The words he uses to describe these men and the objects they carry, such as goblets and flasks, are signifiers of the 'beloveds' in later Persian poetry. (In Hafez,

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<sup>8</sup> *Makhzan al-Asrar*, p. 56 (my translation).

for instance, we find the following line: “His mop of hair tangled ... **flask** in hand, His eyes spoiling for a fight, his lips mouthing “Alas!”<sup>9</sup>).

Ferdowsi’s references are even more unambiguous and are actually based on a historical case: the murder of another poet, the Zoroastrian Abu Mansour Daghighi (921-960 CE). Daghighi, a contemporary of Ferdowsi who also writes epic poetry, was killed by his boy-servant/slave with whom, apparently Daghighi had a relationship of some sort. Ferdowsi mourns Daghighi’s death, commemorating his brilliant command of language and, at the same time, he rues and takes pity on him for what he calls Daghighi’s ‘*khouye bad*’: *bad habit*, namely his interest in young boys:

‘...He gave his sweet life for that bad habit

He did not enjoy even one of his days on this earth

His fate abandoned him

And he was killed by a slave...’.<sup>10</sup>

In terms of this research, the details on Daghighi’s life and unfortunate death are important from at least two different aspects. First of all, it provides counter-evidence to the hegemonic nationalist-homophobic discourse which equates pre-modern same-sex relations with modern homosexuality, insists that any type of ‘same sex’ relationship is an imported cultural product and a result of Greek, Turkish, Arab or Islamic influence. Daghighi lived in Eastern Iran during the Samanid Empire – a dynasty known for its interest in ancient Persian culture. His life was spent in an era of ‘Persian revivalism’ and it is reported that he was a Zoroastrian. The tragic example of his life and death clarifies that same-sex relationships were found even amongst ‘true Persians’ (i.e. Zoroastrians), before various Turkic dynasties ‘polluted’ the purportedly pure Persian heteronormativity. On the other hand, Ferdowsi’s reaction to the death, and the term he uses to describe Daghighi’s ‘homosexual’ tendencies – seeing them as a bad habit and linking this to the misery of Daghighi’s everyday life – is interesting from the perspective of the acceptance of same-sex relationships in that period.

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<sup>9</sup> Translation accessed via: <http://closetprofessor.blogspot.co.uk/2011/05/divan-of-hafiz.html>

<sup>10</sup> <http://ganjoor.net/ferdousi/shahname/aghaz/sh9/>



## **The Reflection of Same-Sex Relations in the Ghaznavid Era and Beyond**

The first explicit examples of same-sex relationships and homoerotica in Persian literature emerge when the Ghaznavid Dynasty (977-1186 CE) seizes power in today's Eastern Iran. The Ghaznavid Dynasty came to power during the last years of Ferdowsi's life. Although Persian homoerotic poetry only reaches its zenith of literary perfection at a later time, when it combines worldly same-sex love with Sufi ideals, the poets of the Ghaznavid era can certainly be regarded as the founders of homoeroticism in Persian poetry. Most of these poets served as court poets, the official spokesmen of the Sultan, and in many instances their poems were custom-made to fit the specific desires and interests of the Sultan. Although in many instances the absence of separate male and female pronouns and adjectives in the Persian language has caused confusion as to whether the beloved that is being described is male or female<sup>11</sup>, especially when it comes to the mystical and symbolic poetry of later centuries, the poems of the Ghaznavid era are utterly unambiguous regarding the sex of the 'beloved', and their clear and simple language leaves no room for doubt that the poet's beloved is indeed male.<sup>12</sup>

In this era, two different versions of same-sex relations evolve. They overlap constantly, but also possess their own separate characteristics. One is the tradition of homoerotic love towards Turkish soldiers, the other is pederasty. The former eventually fades out in practice, with the latter becoming the dominant form of same-sex relations in pre-modern Iran. But although in subsequent years loving soldiers became irrelevant due to various socio-political factors, the poetic language deployed to describe this form of homoerotic relationship by the poets of that era forever dominates Persian lyrical poetry and traces of it can be found to this very day in contemporary Persian literature.

From a social perspective, these same-sex relations should by no means be confused with what today we call homosexuality, which is a modern phenomenon. However, these relations are one of the closest examples of same-sex relations to modern homosexuality, and the furthest from pederasty, in the pre-modern history of Iran. The 'male' beloved in

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<sup>11</sup> This is mostly amongst early translators of Persian Poetry who, whether deliberately or as a result of confusion or ignorance, have translated the Persian gender-neutral pronoun '*ou*' as 'she', whereas in many, if not most instances, the beloved is actually a 'he'.

<sup>12</sup> Yarshater, 1960.

this era, although often not possessing the same social status as his 'lover', is in a relatively powerful situation – particularly when compared to subsequent centuries and the creation of the *Amrad*.<sup>13</sup> Indeed, this young, strong and militaristic beloved will in many instances rise to high levels of power.<sup>14</sup> The most famous example of such a relationship is probably that between Sultan Mahmud of Ghazni (the first sultan of the Ghaznavid dynasty) and his servant Abulnajm Ayaz, who was also one of Ghazni's military commanders. The sultan adored Ayaz until his last days, not just when Ayaz was young. He often paid his court poets to praise Ayaz in their panegyric poems.<sup>15</sup> Ayaz outlives his master and, during Sultan Masud (Mahmud's son) reign, he is treated with great respect and endowed with various official responsibilities.

The soldier 'beloved' of this era is not only adored for his beauty, but for his physical abilities: his strategic and militaristic courage and talent, as well as his wisdom. One of the best examples of an idealised male 'beloved' is reflected in a verse written by Farrokhi Sistani, a court poet of Mahmud of Ghazni, which reveres Ayaz. He starts the verse by describing Ayaz dressed in military clothing and ready to go to the battlefield, describing how his beauty penetrates the hearts of all those present. He then proceeds to explain how Ayaz conquers in battle, piling up the bodies of his enemy soldiers.<sup>16</sup>

The love story of Sultan Mahmud and Ayaz became a classic of Persian literature and many writers and poets retold different versions of it. These writers include Beyhaghi (the great historian of the Ghaznavid era) and the renowned poet Mollana Jalalidin Rumi. Over time, Sufi poets added a mystical twist to the love affair.

<sup>13</sup> The *Amrad* was generally an adolescent youth with feminine features who was the subject of the love of adult males in pre-modern Iran. There are debates on what being an *Amrad* actually meant in that era. Afsane Najmabadi believes that *Amrads* can be classified as neither male nor female, but were actually a third gender with their own distinctive features.

<sup>14</sup> Afary 2009.

<sup>15</sup> Shamisa 2002, p. 44.

<sup>16</sup> In Farsi:

|                                    |                                |
|------------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| دل و بازوی خسرو روز پیکار          | امیر جنگجو ایاز اویماق         |
| به حسرت در فتد دل‌های نظار         | سواری کز در میدان درآید        |
| همی لرزند چون برگ سپیدار           | دلیران از نهییش روز کوشش       |
| ...به سنگ اندر نشانند تیر سوفار    | اگر بر سنگ خارا بر زند تیر     |
| همی زد با جهانی تا شب تار          | به روز روشن از غزنین برون تاخت |
| ...که دشت از کشته شد با پشته هموار | نماز شام را چندان نخواستید     |

From: <http://www.noormags.ir/view/en/articlepage/90351>

This era of Persian literature had an even more significant outcome than the mere addition of Mahmoud and Ayaz's love story and other homoerotic references. The physical, psychological and social characteristics that were deployed by the poets of the time to describe the male 'soldier beloved' turned into staples of Persian literature, even when the male 'beloved' was no longer a soldier, and even when the beloved was neither a soldier nor a man! These 'rough' adjectives which describe the 'beloved' as having a harsh voice and a loud yell, as bloodthirsty, murderous, ruthless and possessing physical characteristics that are influenced by militaristic aesthetics are until this day popular tropes in Persian literature and are especially dominant in Persian poetry.<sup>17</sup>

As mentioned previously, loving a strong soldier of Turkic origins is not the only homoerotic trend of this era. Loving younger males, boys or adolescent youth, was also popular and found reflection in the poetry of Ghaznavid and Onsori. This young boy or adolescent youth is likely to be a page or a servant of the poet. This relationship is essentially based on inequality, with the young 'beloved' often having no other choice than to submit to the desires of his master.

As the trend of loving a soldier fades out and only leaves small traces in literary language, the practice of loving young boys becomes dominant in pre-modern Iranian society. This type of relationship should not be equated with modern homosexuality, which involves two consenting adults, because it actually resembles pederasty. In later centuries the slave-page boy is in many instances replaced by another term, the *Shagerd* (intern).

### **Islamic Rationalists, the Sufi Tradition and Homoeroticism**

Homoeroticism on the one hand, and misogyny on the other, were amongst the main features of the works of major philosophers in the post-Islamic era in Iran. These philosophers were both greatly influenced by Greek thinkers such as Socrates, Plato and Aristotle and also by specific Islamic values and teachings.<sup>18</sup> The Greek tradition valued male

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<sup>17</sup> According to Shamisa, 2002, being of Turkish origins is also an integral part of this soldier 'beloved', to the extent that 'Turk' becomes a trope for 'beautiful' in classical Persian poetry.

<sup>18</sup> As well as socio-cultural factors more generally, of course. In her well-written *Women and Gender in Islam*, Leila Ahmed argues that the expansion of urban life led to the further isolation of women from society. Women who used to mingle freely with men in tribal and rural settings were restricted to an indoor life as the Islamic empire thrived (Ahmed, 1992). The exclusion of women from social settings, and thus their

companionship over romantic relationships between a man and a woman. Women were mostly seen as objects of reproduction and thus not worthy of true romance. By contrast, loving an adolescent youth was idealised.<sup>19</sup> The exact same arguments are found within the works of the Islamic rationalist philosophers in Iran. Their works have two dimensions which promote homoeroticism and lay the theoretical ground for pederasty. One aspect undermines women and emphasises that they are mentally and psychologically inferior to men and hence not an equal rival for a man intellectually. For example, the 11<sup>th</sup> century philosopher Al-Ghazali writes that: “women are created from *Aurat* (in Islamic thought: the intimate parts of the body that need to be covered by clothing) nakedness and weakness. The cure for their weakness is silence and the cure for their *aurat* is to turn their homes into a prison for them”.<sup>20</sup> In other words, according to his argument, women should not be allowed to leave the house and should be secluded from society. When women are declared unworthy of anything but reproduction, the philosophers then recommend companionship with ‘beautiful’ males as an alternative. Different Islamic philosophers have varying takes on what this concretely means. For example, Avicenna (980-1037, an Islamic polymath who in the West is mostly known for his medical books and essays) argues that “it is only rational” to admire a beautiful (male) and try to gain his heart, and encourages same-sex relations to go as far as kissing and cuddling but not intercourse. The kind of same-sex relations accepted by these Islamic rationalists has strong platonic tendencies. Same-sex homoeroticism is a continuous trend amongst even the most conservative, Islamic classical philosophers. Mulla Sadra (1571-1642), one of the most influential philosophers of the Islamic world, attributes one of the chapters of his famous book *Asfar e Arbae* (*Four Journeys*) to “loving beautiful boys”, where he first criticises Muslim thinkers who are against same-sex relationships and then proceeds to defend being in love with beautiful young boys.<sup>21</sup>

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unavailability for sexual and romantic adventures, can be seen as one of the factors behind the adventurous pederasty that dominated the sexual lives of men in Iran and the rest of the Middle East.

<sup>19</sup> In his *Symposium*, Plato theorises the notion of Greek ‘Homoeroticism’ (and not homosexuality, despite what some scholars have suggested).

<sup>20</sup> I had no access to Ghazali’s book ‘*Kimiyaye Saadat*’ and thus I retrieved the quote from Morteza Ravandi’s ‘*Social history of Iran*’, 1980, volume 7, p. 329.

<sup>21</sup> Mollasadra: *Four journeys*, edited by Khajavi 1990.

Nonetheless, the Sufi mystical tradition of Islam, which appeared during the Seljuk Turko-Perisan Empire in the 11<sup>th</sup> century, is even more entangled with same-sex relationships, especially from the perspective of Persian literature.

In the Sufi tradition, beauty is a sign of God, and while God shall be one's ultimate 'beloved', paying attention to and loving worldly signs of God is an important first step on the path to becoming one with the creator, a path that eventually culminates in 'the real love' (*Eshgh e haghghi*, or loving God).<sup>22</sup>

For Sufis, beauty is considered to be one of the God's worldly manifestations. Loving a beautiful person, a creation of God, is thus an acceptable form of love, what is known as *Eshgh e Majazi* (literally: metaphorical love) which can lead to higher levels of mystical insight. Sufi gatherings and circles of the time, much like other places in society, were gender-segregated, so more often than not the earthly 'beauty' as the signature of God's mightiness was to be found in a boy or an adolescent youth. Homoeroticism thus became an integral aspect of the Sufi tradition. The emergence of Sufism coincided with the golden age of Persian literature, where lyrical poetry reached its heights. Many of greatest Persian poets were either Sufis themselves (some of them such as Rumi were even high masters of the sect) or were profoundly influenced by its ideas.

One aspect of the Sufis' literary language, which comes in contrast to the former poets (such as those of the Ghaznavid era) is its complexity and highly symbolic prose. Both reflect the Sufis' literary preferences as well as their mystical tendencies.<sup>23</sup> Not only are their own homoerotic poems symbolic and complex, they also tend to reconstruct former tales of same-sex relationships according to their own ideas. A good example of this is Rumi's take on the love story of Mahmud and Ayaz's. Rumi rids this story of its physical and 'earthly' properties and presents it as the tale of mystical and spiritual love between a king and his slave, who plays the role of a spiritual mentor to the king.

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<sup>22</sup> Shamisa 2002.

<sup>23</sup> This mystical and at times opaque language, together the usual problems associated with the Persian language's unisex pronouns, adjectives and verbs, has made tracing homoeroticism in Sufi-influenced poetry more difficult than in the poetry of their like-minded predecessors. Nevertheless, this is a dilemma that mostly concerns the general public rather than literary critics and experts, since there is still sufficient evidence that the 'beloved' is in most cases male.

Currently there is an on-going debate as to the exact nature and properties of these same-sex relationships in classic Persian literary works. Some classify them as evidence of 'homosexuality', whereas others dismiss it altogether as 'paedophilia'. While 'homosexual' relations are doubtless a modern phenomenon, labelling *all* indications of same-sex relationships in Persian classic literature 'homosexual' is surely an exaggeration. It is true that most of these relations were based on an inequality of power (both in terms of age and social status. In various periods, however, there are counter-examples of relations which involve two adults of similar social statuses. The most prominent example is that between Rumi (1207-1273 c) and Shams of Tabriz (1185-1245 c). Rumi fell in love with Shams the minute their eyes met for the first time in Konya in 1244. At that point, Rumi had succeeded his father as the head of the Islamic institute of Konya, whereas Shams was a well-known Sufi mystic with many dedicated followers. Shams was 20 years his senior and a simple merchant. They started living together immediately and were in a relationship for 16 months, until Rumi's family and disciples were outraged and kidnapped and murdered Shams. In his *Sex and Spirit: Exploring Gay Men's Spirituality*, Robert Barzan notes that the relationship was considered scandalous at the time and was not tolerated by society, as evidenced by the murder of Shams.<sup>24</sup><sup>25</sup> For a long time, Rumi refused to believe that his beloved had died: he continually searched for him and dedicated many poems and even the complete book of his lyrics to Shams. Rumi's poetic portrayal of Shams of Tabriz and their unique relationship is one of the most profound works of homoerotic literature in Persian.<sup>26</sup>

Nonetheless, the kind of mature relationship that existed between Rumi and Shams was not the dominant form of same-sex relationships in pre-modern Iran. In his poetry, Rumi highlights and criticises the pederasty that was common amongst the Sufis. What is

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<sup>24</sup> Barzan, 1995, 28.

<sup>25</sup> Recently, almost all literary researchers who have written about Rumi have felt compelled to comment on his sexual orientation and on the nature of his relationship with Shams. They have mostly limited their discussions to the binary of whether or not the relations were 'homosexual', all the while emphasising the physical relationship between the two. There are broadly two schools of thought. One school emphasises that the relationship was 'homosexual', while the other insists Rumi and Shams were mystics, far beyond 'earthly' needs and interests, and that their relationship certainly did not include physical romance. From the evidence we have available today, we can neither prove nor reject either of the points of view. Indeed, whether or not the relationship included sexual intercourse is not actually of great significance: the fact remains that, regardless of the physical properties of their relationship, Rumi and Shams were lovers, and that their relationship is a timeless example of a deep and profound same-sex relationship which finds beautiful reflection in Rumi's homoerotic poetry.

<sup>26</sup> Harmless, 2008 (159-188)

apparent from his poetry and poetry more generally is that pederasty is usually accepted and tolerated, whereas equal same-sex relationships between two adults would outrage society. And although mystical homoerotic love retained its place in Persian poetry, with the passing of time more and more poets and writers tended to discard the 'spiritual' aspects of same-sex relationships and to move towards more explicit descriptions of the sexual act, or even the physical properties of their pubescent beloved.

### **Post-Sufism, Homoerotica and Pederasty in Persian Literature**

There are numerous Persian language poets – and occasionally writers – whose work abounds with homoerotic references and allusions. Saadi (1210-1291) and Hafez (1320-1389), both from Shiraz, are the most renowned and admired.

Today Saadi Shirazi is mostly known for his humorous anecdotes which usually have a strong moral conclusion. His poetry and prose are featured in public education literary textbooks for Iranian children from an early age. This notwithstanding, both of his books *Golestan* (*The Rose Garden*, written mainly in prose) and *Bustan* (*The Orchard*) depict his same-sex, pederastic experiences. In his 13<sup>th</sup> century living conditions in Shiraz, slave children were no longer feasible and the potential pubescent passive sex partners tended to be young interns who were hired by masters of a trade (such as carpenters, blacksmiths and so on) and due to their social status and accessibility they were potential targets for adult men who were seeking same-sex relationships.<sup>27</sup> What is interesting about Saadi's perspective is that although in numerous texts and verses he 'confesses' that he has enjoyed same-sex experiences (Shahed-bazi) with young boys, and how joyous they were for him, at the same time he advises parents to be cautious and to take care of their young boys, so that they will not be lured into sex by older men. Saadi's dichotomy is very important in the sense that it shows us, from an 'insider's' perspective, that in 13<sup>th</sup> century Iran, the practice of pederasty, while widespread, was not commonly acceptable – analogous, perhaps, to the perception of prostitution in contemporary society.

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<sup>27</sup> In another example, a poem from *Bustan*, Saadi tells the story of a father who shaves his beautiful son's hair to make him look plain, because he fears that a 'Shahedbaz' (pederast) is showing a sexual interest in him (*Bustan*, p. 144).

Hafez is believed to be one of the most important contributors to Iranian classical poetry. It is worth noting that his book of Lyrics is the second best-selling book in today's Iran, topped only by the Koran. And while he is known to Iranians as the poet of profound and romantic love, and to a Western audience as a great mystic poet, the majority (or arguably all of) his poetical romantic references describe young pubescent boys who have shown the first traces of growing facial hair (*Khatt*) and who are in the prime of their beauty.<sup>28</sup>

All the traditions of homoerotic poetry are in a sense summed up in Hafez's work as he combines the spiritual and the physical, the mystic and the symbolic, and at the same time makes explicit references to the physical and psychological features of his young 'beloved'. He further combines the aesthetic properties of various schools of Persian poetry. His 'beloved' looks like the *Khorasani* poet's ideal male: a tall, Turkish youth with bow eyebrows. On the other hand, however, his object of love is a 'reflection' of God's mightiness, just like the Sufis pictured the male 'beloved'. Shamisa (2002) notes that Hafiz's homoerotic poetry is not limited to describing his pubescent beloveds and that some of his romantic lyrics are actually eulogies dedicated to the Emirs of Shiraz. In these poems the praised are described in the same manner and using the same vocabulary as the poet would use when writing about his beloved, which adds another dimension to Persian homoerotic poetry.

### **From the 1300s through to the Qajar Era**

The tradition of homoeroticism continued to dominate Persian romantic verse and prose through until late Qajar era. During this time, much like before, two literary trends are visible: pederastic romance, on the one hand, and a more refined and equal version of same-sex relationships, with the former becoming apparent in majority of literary works and the latter being rather scarce.

For the latter, the poetry of Vahshi Bafghi (1532-1583) provides an illustrative example. Bafghi, a poet of the Safavid era, is mostly known in Iran because his *Farhad and Shirin*, which retells the classical Iranian love story, is mentioned in high school textbooks. Besides the tale of the romantic heterosexual love story, however, he has masterfully composed a long verse 'Nazer and Manzour' which tells the tale of a loving relationship between the

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<sup>28</sup> Shamisa 2002



sons of a Sultan and his grand Vezir. The story begins with the Sultan's and the Vezir's sons being born on the same day. As they grow up together they fall in love. Their teacher threatens to reveal their love to the king, with the result that the Vezir is forced to send his son away in order to protect him. Eventually, however, things come together and Sultan's son, Manzour, settles in Egypt, later succeeds the king and finally becomes re-united with his lover, Nazer, appointing him as his Vezir.<sup>29</sup>

The story of 'Nazer and Manzoor' is a well-developed example of non-pederastic homoerotic literature in pre-modern Iran, revealing how as far as back as the 16<sup>th</sup> century, Persian literature featured homoeroticism of a type that can compete with contemporary LGBT literature in terms of aesthetics, literary devices, plot and cultural impact.

Socially, pederasty remains the dominant form of romantic relationships during the Safavid period and onwards, since women were seen as only fit to take care of the household and reproduction. The relationship between two grown men was not the norm: *Amrads* and younger boys were sources of pleasure for kings and the common folk alike. Apart from literary sources, we also know just how widespread this phenomenon was from the travel memoirs of European travellers. During this period, '*Amrad Khanehs*' (male brothels) were founded in Iran. Their existence was formally recognised by the state – they were, after all, tax-paying establishments.<sup>30</sup>

### **The Qajar Era**

The Qajar dynasty came to power in 1789 through the actions of Agha Mohammad Khan, the head of the Qajar tribe. The Qajars were of Turkic origin, much like many of the other dynasties who ruled post-Islamic Iran. They ruled until 1925, when they were replaced by the Pahlavi dynasty. The late Qajar period sees Iranian society go through fundamental changes politically, economically and intellectually. The beginning of Qajar dynasty is quite similar to previous centuries when it comes to same-sex relationships in society and their reflection in literature. The only exception is that, with the passing of time, same-sex relationships becoming increasingly unequal and indecent, with pederasty becoming dominant.

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<sup>29</sup> Bafghi, 1978.

<sup>30</sup> Floor 2010.

Afsaneh Najmabadi notes that in the early Qajar era “beautiful men and women were depicted with very similar facial and bodily features”. This certainly true in the case of the *Amrads*, who were expected to possess qualities that by today’s standards are regarded as feminine. It is crucial to note that despite the subjective preferences of later authors, such as Najmabadi, *Amrads* were in no way a ‘third’ gender: the process of becoming an *Amrad* was an unfortunate event that usually befell young boys from impoverished backgrounds who were usually brought up in negligence and were later either lured into, or more often paid for, servicing the older men of upper-classes.

With the appearance of the first signs of a moustache, the *Amrads* were considered to be at the peak of their beauty. Yet this short-lived period would soon be over and the *Amrad* boy would be considered unsuitable for a relationship. Many verses and proses from this era (the millennium of pederastic relations) express the writer’s fear of his young beloved’s puberty, which would inevitably end the relationship – a relationship which from the outset was based on one-sided pleasure and not on mutual feeling or consent.<sup>31</sup>

Besides pubescent males, very young boys were also the subject of the attention of older men. This aspect is what certain researchers focus on in their attempts to portray *Shahed-bazi* as an exotic ‘oriental’ equivalent of modern homosexuality, which they deem a ‘Western’ phenomenon. Whilst pederasty and relations with pubescent *Amrads* were totally common both in urban and rural eras during the Qajar period, it was a privilege of the upper classes and specifically the aristocracy and the royalty to have concubine boys who served them sexually<sup>32</sup>. The most renowned example is probably that of Naser-al-din, the Shah of Qajar, who had a sexual relationship with the young nephew of one of his wives. The shah called Naser-al-din ‘Aziz-al-Sultan (‘the Sultan’s precious’) and was commonly known by his nickname: *Malijac* (the sparrow). The king had developed feelings for the boy since the boy had turned five and kept him in his vicinity himself until the boy reached his early teenage years (before his puberty), whereupon he was married to one of the king’s daughters.

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<sup>31</sup> Shamisa, 2002. It should also be noted that the relationship between an older man and an *Amrad* would often commence long before the boy had reached puberty. The relationship usually began when he was still considered a ‘child’ – not only by today’s standards, but also according to the people who lived in that age.

<sup>32</sup> Floor 2008 (Persian translation), 303.

Shamisa refers to the relationship between the king and the child as 'Sadeh-Bazi', which is different from the relationships with *Amrads* and pubescent boys, since a '*sadeh*' (literally meaning plain), is younger than an *Amrad*, probably less than ten years old. Examples of 'Sadeh-Bazi' are not limited to the royal courts either: Iraj Mirza, a famous poet of the 20<sup>th</sup> century Constitutional Revolution, also portrays 'Sadeh' boys in his poetry: his physical description of these boys leaves us in no doubt that he is talking about little boys and not adolescent youths.<sup>33</sup>

During the early to mid-Qajar period, other non-poetry literary forms began to gain momentum within Iranian society. Memoirs and travel diaries become more common, the first novels are written and magazines and newspapers appear in the new Iranian public sphere for the first time. The new forms were born as a result of fundamental changes in Iranian society and in their quest for further socio- political change they also sought new types of relationships – primarily a modern romantic relation built between a man and a woman. We shall return to this topic later.

Despite the growth of other written forms, the dominant form of Persian literature remains poetry. Similarly to the previous century, same-sex relationships were demonstrated in the poems of this era, although they were much less impressive on a literary level and tended more towards describing the act of sex. Shamisa, for example, describes such poetry as obscene.<sup>34</sup>

Nonetheless, there is some prose available from this period which alludes to same-sex relationships. One example is the *Resaleye Fojooriye*<sup>35</sup> written in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century by *Shahzadeh* (prince) *Vali Ibn Sohrab Gorji* at the personal request of king Naser-Aldin of the

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<sup>33</sup> It should be noted that sexual relationships between two adult men would also take place. These relationships would be based on a strict binary of the passive (*Maboun*) and active partners, and the relationships would mainly be sexual. Unlike the relationship with an *Amrad*, there was no glory in having sex with a *Maboun*, nor would poets and writers fall in love with their passive sexual partners who were considered adults, hence the absence of romantic and other types of verse and prose about adult same-sex relations. According to Najmabadi, an *Amrad* was expected *not to* enjoy the relationship sexually and eventually to 'outgrow' his passive role during adulthood and to form a regular family – even finding his own *Amrad* as he grows older (Najmabadi 2005). While this practice has been mainly abolished in Iran, it has continued in another Farsi-speaking country, Afghanistan. Janet Afary notes an instance of one of such kind of relationship which took place under Taliban rule in the 1990s.

<sup>34</sup> Shamisa 2002.

<sup>35</sup> The book can be accessed here: <http://upir.ir/aban93/%D8%B1%D8%B3%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%87-%D9%81%D8%AC%D9%88%D8%B1%DB%8C%D9%87.pdf>

Qajar dynasty. Although the book is worthless from a literary perspective and is written in very amateur language, it is unique in the sense that it is a pornographic (confessional) memoir book from 19<sup>th</sup> century Iran in which the writer explicitly recalls his sexual experiences with aristocratic women, prostitutes and finally male and female slaves and servants. Unlike his detailed and excited description of his sexual relations with aristocratic ladies (some of whom are the king's distant relatives – something that does not prevent Gorji from naming names!), the description of his relationships with young boys and men is rather brief. He has not categorised them by their age or sexual/gender classification but instead has created two new categories. The first category consists of his personal servants and others. These personal servants consist of 27 people in total, including his cup bearer, horse tamer, cleaner etc. The youngest one quite possibly started 'serving' at the age of nine. However, it is suggested that some of these servants were older and even senior. The other category of males, 65 in total, consists of those who were not his servants. Again the ages appear to vary: supposedly the youngest is even less than nine. Most of these men, with the exception of one or two that he had raped while they were drunk, appear to be other people's servants, dancers, singers and the young interns of craftsmen and boys. All these men, with one or two exceptions, were paid by the author for their services –either in money or in goods such as clothing, daggers and so on<sup>36</sup>. This book is probably the clearest example we have today that provides us with an overall image of the unequal and horrific nature of most same-sex relations in pre-modern Iran, where being sexually abused by one's boss was apparently part of the job description and luring and raping children was something to boast about to the highest authority of the country, i.e the king. The example shows that what Foucault enthusiastically praised as an exotic eastern *Ars Erotica* (Erotic Art, as opposed to the Western *Scientia Sexualis*, Sexual Science<sup>37</sup>), was rooted in significant class, gender and racial discrimination.

### **Female same-sex relations**

There is little evidence of female same-sex relationships in the pre-modern era. Unlike men, most women, at least in urban areas, were restricted to their homes and had little

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<sup>36</sup> Book accessed via: <http://khan65.blogfa.com/post/21>

<sup>37</sup> Foucault contrasts Eastern erotic art and Western sexual science, stating that the erotic art's mission is to figure out how pleasure can be maximised. This does not forbid or rule out certain types of pleasure, whereas Western sexual science is restrictive in nature. Foucault 1990.

opportunity for sexual or even social adventures. However, as society was segregated, homosociality became increasingly the norm for both women and men. It was not common for ordinary women to socialise with men other than their *Maharim* (an Islamic term for man related to a woman – primarily as her father, brother, son or husband), so inevitably they turned to other females for friendship and comfort. On occasion, these friendships would become very special for both parties, leading to bonds and oaths of sisterhood. Afary notes:

“... Bonds of sisterhood were common among married women, while single women were prohibited from entering into such relationships. The tradition dedicated that one who sought another as ‘sister’ approached a love broker to negotiate the matter ... Before exchanging vows of sisterhood, it was customary for the two women to socialize for several months. They might send gifts to each other including spices and herbs, which symbolised their love and longing for each other.”<sup>38</sup>

However, there is no evidence to clarify the exact nature of these bonds, as to what degree they were friendships and companionship and to what degree they had a more significant emotional or sexual nature. Literary sources are also not really helpful on this score, because the majority of the literary written texts preserved from the period were written by men who have clearly not documented same-sex female relations. Moreover, the works of the few female poets and writers do not include any significant hints at lesbian relationships. The one possible exception can be found in Taj-alsaltaneh’s memoirs. Taj-alsaltaneh was the daughter of the Qajar king Naser-al-din-Shah. She grew up in Naser-al-din’s harem and, after his assassination; she was married off to the son of a wealthy family. She is widely regarded as one of the pioneers of women’s rights in Iran. Her memoirs mainly focus on her childhood memories and her relationship with her husband, whom she had divorced by the time she wrote the memoirs. She highlights the special relationship she had formed with a Christian seamstress and confidante and describes how sad and lonely she felt when she had to leave her and travel back to Tehran. While Taj does not elaborate further on the relationship, her style of writing and the words she uses suggest that the relationship had romantic aspects:

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<sup>38</sup> Afary 2009, p. 102.

“She (Anna) was a beautiful eighteen-year-old with black eyes, she was a seamstress ... eventually I grew fond of her and she sincerely adored me too. She spent most of her time at my place. Tear drops always shined like brilliants in her black eyes and with her pleasant voice she would say: ‘I love you’. Her voice penetrated the depth of my heart, and I always wanted to hear her say it ....”<sup>39</sup>

There are several sources (mostly from western travellers) which suggest that women living in the king’s harems might have been emotionally and sexually involved with each other<sup>40</sup>, but most remaining documents (Taj-Altaneh’s memoirs included) suggest that these women lived in an unfortunate condition of eternal competition and hostility towards one another. It is quite possible that the supposed homoeroticism of the female harem was more result of the Orientalist imaginations of the travellers than based on facts.

### **The Transformation of Society, the Constitutional Revolution and the Pahlavi Period**

As mentioned previously, the late nineteenth century (which coincided with the late Qajar period) saw a traditional society challenged by its changing infrastructures and the pursuit of modernisation. The construction of a modern Iranian nation-state called for fundamental changes in various aspects of society. Unlike many other countries during a similar time-period, Iranian rulers did not show much interest in keeping up to speed with the inevitable changes that were on their way to happen. The Iranian intelligentsia took over instead and tried to introduce features of modernity to Iranian society.<sup>41</sup> The social and political demands led to a Constitutional Revolution in Iran in 1906. In the free environment that was created after the revolution, the already-existing demands for freedom of speech, a functioning parliament and a modern bureaucratic system, social demands for the improvement of living conditions amongst the lower classes, gender issues and questions of women’s liberation came to the fore. These concerns of the Iranian elite in this period also led to a rethinking of dominant sexual practices.

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<sup>39</sup> Taj-Altaneh 1999, p. 132. My translation.

<sup>40</sup> Afary 2009, p.101.

<sup>41</sup> It would be far from reality and fairness to simplify the pursuit of modernisation in Iran as merely a result of ‘Western’ influence or an imperialist conspiracy carried out by a few isolated intellectuals with no organic relationship to the mass of the people. The quest for modernisation was a multidimensional phenomenon that was influenced by both internal and external factors.

In the recent years it has been suggested that heteronormativity gained hegemony in Iranian society as a result of the efforts of the Iranian Westernised elite. Scholars who are more liberal in orientation have even blamed the effect of Marxist ideas on the supposed growth of homophobia in early 20<sup>th</sup> century Iran.<sup>42</sup> However, the fact is these attempts at modernisation were not aimed at homosexuality (a consensual relationship between two adults) simply because Iranian society had no understanding of such relations back then. The Iranian intelligentsia was primarily opposed to traditional, unequal same-sex relations.

On the other hand, status-defined same-sex relations occurred between two adult males. The status was based on their role in sexual intercourse, active vs. passive, and had been looked down upon and was unacceptable in the Iranian society, even centuries prior to any potential western/Marxist influence on Iranian society. In fact, renowned Islamic scholars such as Mohammad Ibn Zakaria Al-Razi (854-925 CE), classified the male desire to assume the role of a passive partner in sex as a disease as early as the 10<sup>th</sup> century<sup>43</sup>. This negative point of view towards the adult passive partner in sex was a heritage of pre-modernisation Iran and unfortunately remained in existence after the Constitutional Revolution. It exists until today regardless of Western influence.

It was actually another issue that the Iranian elite at the turn of the nineteenth century were outraged about and opposed to: in line with their pursuit of equality and fairness in other aspects of social life in Iran, it was the unequal nature of traditional the same-sex relations to which they objected. With the new-found ideals, and more importantly the possibility to declare their beliefs, they objected to relations which occurred between a child (or an adolescent teenager/*amrad*) and an adult man in the form of pederasty, or between a master and servant (as is documented in texts such as the previously mentioned *resaleye fojouriye*)<sup>44</sup>. Objecting to these types of unequal relations that one of the parties had to submit to due to inferior age or social-economical class occurred simultaneously, and was of the exact same nature as the Iranian intellectuals objecting to other forms of sexual abuse, such as the master sexually abusing the female servant. An example of the latter is well documented and portrayed in many works of early and mid-20<sup>th</sup> century Persian literature

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<sup>42</sup> For more information, cf. Najmabadi and Afary.

<sup>43</sup> Floor, 2010

<sup>44</sup> The book can be accessed here: <http://upir.ir/aban93/%D8%B1%D8%B3%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%87-%D9%81%D8%AC%D9%88%D8%B1%DB%8C%D9%87.pdf>

as well (for example in the works of Simin Daneshvar or Bozorg Alavi). So although Iranian intellectuals in that particular period were in no way free of bias, and had many theoretical and practical shortcomings when it came to homophobia, and although the understanding that many of them had of women's liberation was quite superficial, their opposition to unequal same-sex practices was certainly one of their vices, and can in no way be equated with modern homophobia.

Moving back to the subject of literature, the poetry of shazdeh (prince) Iraj Mirza (title: Jalal-al-Mamalek) 's (1874-1926) embodies the complete transformation of Iranian society's attitude towards same-sex relationships. In his early life the young prince practiced same-sex relations and portrayed them in his poetry. The nature of these relationships was exactly as it was common amongst and expected from men in his social position: he exclusively assumed the role of the *fael* (active) partner in the same-sex relationship with a child or an adolescent youth. Similar to other poets of his era, his poetry in most cases lacks the Sufi-influenced mystical homoeroticism that was a characteristic of the poetry of previous centuries; instead he inclines towards story telling in the form of verse. He usually begins by providing an account of how he convinced/lured the child or adolescent youth to bed and later moves onto informing the readers about the physical details of the sexual act. Some of his poetry also describes his unsuccessful attempts at sleeping with a child/teenager: one example is the poem in which, depressed by the fact that he has not been able to lure a boy into bed, he fantasizes that the child's protective father will die, providing him with the opportunity to marry the child's mother merely in order to be able to get his hands on the boy. In another poem, deploying the satirical style he is known for, he jokes with his contemporary poet, the famous poet of the Constitutional Revolution, Aref Ghazvini, about Aref's protectiveness of his young male 'beloved'<sup>45</sup>. In the later stages of his life, Iraj Mirza, influenced by ideas of the Constitutional Revolution, reproaches his sexual practices and becomes a critic of his own past. Similar to what Najmabadi has argued, he comes to the conclusion that his same-sex practices were a result of women's segregation from the society. Iraj Mirza is the last Iranian poet who features pederasty in his poetry, and the first

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<sup>45</sup> For other aspects of Iraj Mirza's life and poetry in English, see: <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/iraj-mirza-jalal-al-mamalek>.



to criticise traditional same-sex relations openly. His shift is a signifier of the changing social patterns in Iranian society.

### Summary and Conclusion

Post 1000s Persian literature, both in forms of verse and prose, features male homoerotica and reflects the male same-sex relations that were common in the society. The relations described in these works are based on inequality and are status-defined: *fael* (the active partner) versus the *mafoul* (the passive partner), with the activeness and the passiveness defined by the partners' age and social statuses.<sup>46</sup> Kamran Talattof writes:

"Historically male sex in Iran cannot be conceptualized as homosexuality because the giver and the receiver were viewed differently; the former was received as normal and the latter as abnormal."<sup>47</sup>

Commonly, the 'beloved' of classic Persian poetry is a boy/adolescent teenager (*amrad*) who assumes the passive role in sex. None of the widely available homoerotic poems of classical Persian poetry have been written by a 'passive' partner: all of them have been written by the 'active' partner.

The reflection of homoerotica and same-sex relations in classical Persian literature has exhibited various features throughout the centuries. For example, the poets of the *Khorasani School* of poetry deployed a straight forward language whereas Persian mystical, Sufi-influenced poetry tended towards complication and symbolism in description of same-sex relations.

Although pederastic-type practices were the most common and are more widely reflected in Persian poetry, throughout the history of Persian literature there are several examples of prose/verse where the same-sex relationship has features than can be compared to modern homosexuality. Examples for this trend are some of the Ghaznavid era's poetry, where the poet's 'beloved' was a military soldier. The reflection of Shams and Rumi's relationship in Rumi's poetry and the example of Vahshi Bafghi's lyrical love story between the sons of a Sultan and a Vezir are a further example.

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<sup>46</sup> Korycki, Nasirzadeh, 2012 p.8.

<sup>47</sup> Talattof, 2011 p.39.

The first trend which features unequal relations with pederastic characteristics has been the dominant trend in Persian classical literature. Despite being widespread, pederastic same-sex relations were not acceptable to many layers of pre-modern Iranian society in their own time.

During the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and the Iranian constitutional revolution (1906-1911) and its aftermath, Iranian intellectuals opted for eliminating pederastic same-sex relations in the society. They believed that these relations have become common as a result of women's segregation from society. Their positions against this practice were expressed in the Iranian public sphere (through their numerous magazines and papers etc) and became popular.

However, the consequences of opposing the pederastic form of same-sex relations were complicated. It is true that they were mainly successful in eliminating the sexual exploitation of children, servants and so on, but in subsequent years the Iranian intelligentsia and society generalised its experience and understanding of the traditional practice of unequal same-sex relations to the emerging phenomenon modern homosexuality, assuming them to be the same thing or very similar. On the other hand, the historical Iranian-Islamic heritage of considering an adult man who assumes the passive role in sex as 'diseased' and abnormal remained popular and was even further strengthened when it became acquainted with modern Western heteronormative narratives. To make matters even worse, the fundamentalist Islamic movements, which were growing in Iran as well as the rest of the region, called for a stricter implementation of Islamic Sharia law, which similarly to other Abrahamic religions prohibits same-sex relations, which resulted in the further suppression of the emergence of the Iranian LGBT community in the Iranian public sphere for the most part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

### **Pahlavi Era**

When Reza Shah was declared the king of Iran in 1923, the last traces of classic homoerotic and pederastic poetry had already disappeared. The new forms, such as novels, stories and the restructured Persian poetry (known as *shere no: new poetry*) in most cases preferred to focus on social issues, and the few remaining poets who followed the classical lyrical structure replaced the former 'adolescent male' with a female 'beloved'. In the last page of his 2002 book on homoeroticism in Persian literature, Sirus Shamsi writes:

“Due to its long history in Iran, *Shahedbazi* (pederastic same-sex relations) was more or less practiced during the (early) Pahlavi, *but it has not been reflected in the literature of this period ...*”<sup>48</sup>

Unfortunately, for the most part he appears to be right. The disappearance of the traditional form of homoerotica that was reflected in Persian literature, to the extent that it had become one of its main characteristics, did not coincide with birth of a self-conscious LGBT literature. This period, which spans almost fifty years, can be called the era of the absence of same-sex relations and LGBT issues from Persian literature. In the Pahlavi era, a sudden, 50-year gap is formed when it comes the presence of non-heterosexual feelings in Persian literature. During this period, most avant-garde and creative writers and poets explore expressing their feelings about the opposite sex and are often praised by the intellectuals and progressive layers of society for their courage in portraying the physical properties of romance and love. The Pahlavi era tends to equate modern homosexuality with the traditional same-sex relations that were common in the past, seeing them as a social taboo and wrong doing that was mainly conducted by writers and intellectuals.

Besides that, during this era there was an intentional and ongoing effort to eliminate homoerotic Persian literature. Afary writes:

“... Intellectuals and educators pressed for the elimination of poems with homosexual themes from school textbooks. Here, the best-known advocate was the noted historian Ahmad Kasravi, who helped shape many cultural and educational policies of the 1930s and 1940s... (Kasravi) supported socially-engaged forms of poetry that addressed concrete problems. ... The poems of the great Sufi masters which dealt with homosocial love, wine and drugs did not fulfil these criteria. For Kasravi homosexuality was measure of cultural backwardness.’<sup>49</sup>

Under such circumstances, even if an Iranian writer or a poet had a non-hetero sexual orientation, they would not be able to declare it. One might think that this is not that strange considering that we are discussing a ‘Muslim’ country in the early to mid-twentieth century, but the fact is that in that period the Iranian intellectual sphere was quite

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<sup>48</sup> Shamisa, 2002, 256

<sup>49</sup> Afary 2009, p.163-164.

progressive and radical in many aspects (much like many other places in the world in that era). However, due to multiple reasons which were briefly discussed previously, the Iranian intellectual sphere, which had already denounced traditional pederastic same-sex relations, was not yet open to understanding and accepting modern homosexuality.

This is the reason that even a writer as significant as Sadegh Hedayat (1903-1951), who is regarded as the greatest contemporary Persian writer and well-known for challenging all types of social prejudices, such as religion, is reluctant to write about his homosexuality openly and only mentions it in a letter that he writes in French to a friend (Cheragh mag 2007) <sup>50</sup> and whilst he explores many subjects and writes stories with a variety of characters and narrators, his gay character(s) always remain in the closet. It is only by reading in between the lines that it can be possible to link some of his stories with his non-expressed homosexuality. An example is his short story *bombast* (dead-end) from the collection: *Sage Velgard (Tramp Dog)*, where it is implied that the main character, Sharif, is homosexual, but it is not said so explicitly. Recently, one of Hedayat's former companions and close friends, M.F Farzaneh, wrote a trilogy about Hedayat's life and work, in which he mentions that Hedayat was homosexual. He also recalls Hedayat's interest in Western homosexual writers such as André Gide and Oscar Wilde. The memoirs also mention going to gay bars with Hedayat in Paris. <sup>51</sup>

The dilemma of not being able to differentiate between modern homosexuality and traditional pedarestic same-sex relations continues in the Pahlavi era to the extent that wherever same-sex relations are alluded to in Persian literature, it is in the form of an unequal relation and or sexual exploitation: for instance, Jalal Ale Ahamad's renowned 1958 novella *Modire Madrese/The School Principal*. The book is about a school principal's struggle in a 1950s Iranian boys' school, which symbolises Iranian society, and the man's efforts to control the chaotic situation in school. The book is a perfect example of Ale Ahmad's (and the general Iranian intelligentsia's) critiques of Pahlavi politics and Iranian society prior to the 1979 revolution. During the course of the story, the school situation keeps getting worse, and everyday a new catastrophe occurs. Despite his efforts, the principle is unable to keep the situation under control. He has inherited the school in a chaotic situation after the

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<sup>50</sup> <http://www.cheraq.net/35/mur.htm>

<sup>51</sup> Farzaneh 1993.

former principal was arrested by the intelligence agencies for being a leftist. During the academic year he loses two teachers, his third grade teacher is also arrested by the intelligence agencies for similar reasons, and his fourth grade teacher has fallen victim to a drunk-driving American expatriate. In the final chapter of the book, one of the older students in school rapes a younger one. The principal finds this out through the victim's family who have come to school to seek justice. Frustrated, the principal beats the rapist up in the school yard. A few days later the (offender) boy's wealthy and influential family sue the principal, which leads to his resignation from the school. The victim's family do not pursue the matter further and disappear right after the rapist is beaten up in the school yard<sup>52</sup>.

The word 'rape' or 'rapist' is actually never used throughout the story. Ale Ahmad's principal refers to the rapist as *Fael* (doer, active) all the time and the victim is either simply regarded to as *mafoul* (passive) or as: *pesari ke namooshesh dastkari shode*, as the boy whose namoos (honour) has been compromised. Furthermore the principal, despite his own frustration, is surprised that the victim's family have actually chosen to make the matter public. The rapist (or *fael*, in Ale Ahmad's words) is completely comparable to his pre-19<sup>th</sup> century predecessors. First of all he lures the victim into his home (the excuse is to show him his stamp collection), in a similar manner that is described in works of poets such as Iraj Mirza. Secondly when, surprisingly, the victim's parents show up in school and he is called out of his class he acts as if he has done nothing wrong. In the principal's words: "He did not expect anyone to even call him *to*" (the singular form of you, which in contrast with *Shoma*, the plural and formal form of you, is not considered very polite). The principal's reaction (beating him) is surprising to everyone, from the vice-principal to the footman, and when his initial anger (which in fact is mainly triggered by the victim's father's aggressive behaviour) fades, the principal blames himself for losing control as well, telling himself that it was none of his business and that: "I am not appointed to guard other people's children's bottoms...". Finally, the rapists' social status is what gives him the ability to abuse someone else without facing the consequences, so even though theoretically speaking he could be sued by the victim's family, as with pre-modern same-sex relations, his influential and wealthy family is his protecting shield. The only difference is that by the late 1950s when this book was

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<sup>52</sup> Ale Ahmad, 1966.

written, the action, although conceived as relatively 'normal' by most, including the principal, is starting to be less publicly acceptable.<sup>53</sup>

In the final two decades of the Pahlavi era (during the 1960s and 1970s), a reactionary wave of anti-Westernisation dominates Iranian intellectual society, influenced by the global anti-imperialist movement. The ideas of renowned writers such as Frantz Fanon greatly affected the Iranian writers during these years. Those like Jalal Al e Ahmad rallied for a mild version of Islamic revivalism and a 'return to self', meaning that they refrained from symbols of Western values and preached a return to a vague traditional/Islamic style of life. This movement, as well as the pro-modernist, nationalist movement, condemned homosexuality and any non-heterosexual relationships. This time around, such 'unethicality' and 'corruption' was blamed on the Western influence (The main difference was that the revivalist advocates believed that homosexuality was a result of Western decadency rather than a backwards internal culture). Thus the Iranian LGBT community did not find a lot of opportunity to appear in the intellectual sphere of the Iranian society. It was also still used as a tool to demoralise the ruling class in the eyes of the common people. A good example of this is in a poem by Ahmad Shamlou, in which he describes two of the intelligence agency officers as '*hamjensbaz va ghassab/The Gay and the Butcher*, in order to criticise and undermine them (Ghoghnus dar baran, 1965).<sup>54</sup>

An issue that probably further reinforced the Iranian (mainly leftist) intellectual and literary elite in not accepting modern homosexuality was that eventually, during Mohammadreza Shah's reign, the small Iranian homosexual community had become known as affiliates of the Shah regime. This generally refined and wealthy community used to hang out in places such as Rasht29 club and the Yas restaurant in Tehran's Hilton. Some of the members of this small (male) homosexual community were artists, such as the designer Keyvan Khosravani who designed some of the ancient-Persian inspired formal dresses for Iran's last empress, Farah Pahlavi. Another is Bijan Saffari, the designer of the well-known *Daneshjou* Park in central Tehran, in which he installed sculptures with a homoerotic theme (which are still

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<sup>53</sup> What is also mentionable is that the school principle also confirms the common consensus that the reason behind the incident is probably the absence of females from the '*fael (active)*'s social life, arguing that: "he is probably not even allowed to play with his cousins, probably in his family girls should cover their faces from the age of eleven or twelve from boys their same age".' Modire Madrese (school principal, 1958, p. 165)

<sup>54</sup> According to Reza Farmand, it is also probable that he has made the common mistake of equating paedophilia and homosexuality. Farmand (2010) <http://www.akhbar-rooz.com/article.jsp?essayId=13809>

displayed in the park), and finally the famous singer and pre-revolution TV show man Fereidoun Farokhzad (he was the younger brother of the renowned poet Forough Farokhzad), who was later murdered in his Bonn flat by the agents of the Iranian Islamic regime in 1992.<sup>55</sup> The closeness of the known members of the homosexual community to the Iranian royalty was perhaps a further reason for the Iranian cultural elite to associate homosexuality with Westernization and firmly reject it.<sup>56</sup>

### **After the 1979 Revolution<sup>57</sup>**

The 1979 revolution fundamentally changed many aspects of the Iranian society, bringing the most conservative tenets that had existed in some layers of society to the surface and allowing them to gain dominance. This situation continues until this day. At the heart of the Islamic and superficial anti-imperialist ideology propounded by the majority of the revolutionaries, the future of the emerging Iranian LGBT community was not a subject anybody was interested in discussing. This is hardly surprising when you consider that the century-long struggle for women's liberation was largely played down even by the most progressive revolutionaries (i.e. various leftist groups) in the name of revolutionary priorities, which meant fighting the West and imperialism. Post-revolution laws criminalised both male and female homosexuality (*Lavat* and *Mosaheghe*), but to many people's surprise Ayatollah Rouhollah Khomeini, the first supreme leader of Iran, issued a fatwa in 1984 granting transsexual people the right to undergo a sex-change operation if they could medically establish their case. From this point on, established homosexuality is seen as a crime, a violation of the Islamic law, and being transgender is seen as a sickness, a unfortunate mistake in creation. Under these circumstances, those formerly open homosexuals who belonged to the upper classes of Iranian society left the country permanently and those who did not needed to hide their sexual identities. In the years after the Iranian revolution when the initial hopes and excitement had faded and Islamic tyranny overcame other revolutionaries, thousands of people (predominantly revolutionary political

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<sup>55</sup> This information is from an interview with a former member of the community published in:

<http://haalat.net/2015/10/02/%D8%A2%DB%8C%D8%A7-%D9%BE%D9%87%D9%84%D9%88%DB%8C%D8%8C-%D8%AF%D9%88%D8%B3%D8%AA-%DA%AF%DB%8C-%D9%87%D8%A7-%D8%A8%D9%88%D8%AF%D8%9F/>

<sup>56</sup> It is also common knowledge that the fact that the Shah's long term prime minister, Amir Abbas Hoveyda, reportedly gay, was portrayed as a figure of ridicule by the Iranian intelligentsia in their struggle against the Pahlavi regime.

<sup>57</sup> All the translations of literary texts is by me, unless otherwise stated.

activists from various leftist organizations and the Mujahidin-e-Khalgh,) as well as affiliates of the former regime and in some cases members of particular religious minorities, were executed. Reportedly, some were killed due to their sexual orientation, although some who had been executed for being convicted of 'sodomy' were apparently not homosexuals.<sup>58</sup> But the Iranian regime found it beneficial to execute them for 'sodomy', probably in a bid to win over the support of the religious masses.

Interestingly though, at the same time that the Iranian state was condemning homosexuality, deeming it yet another 'Western' threat or even a conspiracy designed to corrupt Iranian Muslims, the strict re-segregation of Iranian society once again cleared the ground for same-sex contact and thus relationships. Although homosociality had always, more or less, remained the norm in Iranian society, and by the late Pahlavi period it was well on its way to becoming less and less relevant amongst more secular layers of urban society,<sup>59</sup> it was reintroduced to Iranian society as the only acceptable form of social relations. Subsequently, most social spaces, such as schools, were segregated and a so called 'moral police' was established in order to enforce this strict gender segregation in all public spaces. On occasion, this police expanded its territory to private spaces too in order to prevent *na-mahram* (unrelated people according to the Sharia understanding) women and men from socialising with each other.<sup>60</sup> In this discourse, homosociality is introduced as a signifier of Islamic values, whereas heterosociality is considered to be a signifier of Western decadence.

### **Homosociality and Militaristic Homoeroticism**

The Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988) increased the amount of homosocial spaces: both for males who fought on the frontier and for women who were gathered in places like mosques in order to support each other and the war effort. Furthermore, in the exceptional space that was created as a result of the war, a religious literature with distinct traces of

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<sup>58</sup> Afary 2009.

<sup>59</sup> That is not to say that in rural or tribal spaces there was no socialising between the two sexes. On the contrary, in most tribal and rural spaces throughout Iranian history, not least because of the living conditions in an economy that was dependent on women, men and women had a traditionally defined connection to each other on a daily basis, which of course is different from both the traditional complete segregation of pre-modern times in urban areas, as well as from modern relations and the mingling of the sexes.

<sup>60</sup> The invasion of private spaces mostly occurred during a social gathering, i.e. when a party was held in a private space. This practice is on-going.



homoeroticism (similar in many ways to that of pre-19<sup>th</sup> century Persian homoerotic poetry) was born, or rather reborn<sup>61</sup>. So although an openly gay lifestyle became criminalised and was not tolerated, a religious militaristic homoeroticism was promoted. This homoeroticism manifested itself in various forms, such as battlefield songs, poetry, texts, propaganda war literature and illustrations. For Minoo Moallem:

“The convergence of popular culture practices grounded in Shia mythology, modern nationalism and pre-modern and modern views of gender and sexuality creates a homosocial and homoerotic word for warrior men to establish a community of brothers who recognize themselves through the concomitant process of othering and domesticating women.”<sup>62</sup>

During and after the war, the Iranian state promoted and supported (financially and otherwise) a state propaganda type of war literature. Although this literature never gained popularity amongst the average Iranian reader and was dismissed by literary critics and intellectuals, with state backing it continued to be produced. The significant homoerotic characteristic of this trend of literature appears in the depictions of ‘love’, ‘lover’ and the ‘beloved’. Similar to Sufi-influenced homoerotic literature from the previous centuries, earthly and mystical divine love often converge. In the Iran-Iraq war literature (in Farsi called it is *adabiyate defae’ moghadas: Holly Defence Literature*) male comradeship and companionship, the ‘brotherly’ Islamic love for one’s fellow soldiers, is interspersed with love for Shia’ Imams, which results in the military ‘brother’s’ desire for martyrdom, to unite with the earthly (their already martyred comrades and brothers) and the divine (Shia Imams and saints) in heaven. Interestingly, the earlier the date of publication, the stronger the homoerotic expression and the more exclusive the homosocial space. In her analysis of an official state book, *Talashi dar tasvire jebhe (The Iran- Iraq War an: Attempt to Portray the Battlefield)*, which is a collection of photography, poetry and prose, Minoo Moallem, writes:

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<sup>61</sup> Minoo Moallem, amongst others, attributes this type of militaristic homoeroticism to features and potentials of a ‘postmodern’ Iranian revolution and its challenging of a Western ‘heteronormative’ discourse, writing: “However, when Iranian wartime homoeroticism is compared to the war literature of other countries and times, it becomes clear that male homoeroticism has been a dominant feature of many previous wars, for example researches conducted on the First World War reveal a similar type of homoeroticism. Look at works such as George Johnson’s *Mourning and Mysticism in First World War Literature and Beyond* or Sarah Cole’s *Modernism, Male Friendship, and the First World War* for further reference”.

<sup>62</sup> Moallem 2005, p. 117.

“The war zone is a place between life and death, a land without women, enabling the expression of homoerotic desire. In this homosocial world, men live in proximity to each other and take care of each other.”<sup>63</sup>

Although in the recent years there have been efforts to heteronormalise the official war literature and also to include women’s anecdotes and memories to the existing literature (the most successful example is probably *One Woman’s War: Da*<sup>64</sup> by Zahra Hosseini, published in 2014), the majority of work has remained focussed on the homosocial and the homoerotic, with occasional hints at same-sex relations on the frontiers, or at least the temptation of it. An example can be found in Jennifer Chandler’s PhD thesis ‘No Man’s Land: Representations of Masculinities in Iran-Iraq War Fiction’ (2012), where she describes scenes from Ahmad Dehghan’s war novel *Journey Heading 270 degrees*: “When Ali, Naser’s best friend, forgets his sleeping bag, he asks to share Naser’s sleeping bag. When he makes his request he does so flirtatiously, trying to entice Naser to share a traditionally private heteronormative space and transform it into a comradely, homosocial space.”<sup>65</sup>

### **Female Homosociality in Parsipour’s *Women without Men***

Homosocial spaces are not limited to the war zone and the frontiers in post-revolution literature, nor are they limited to men and brotherly love. In her 1989 novella, *Women without Men*, Shahrnosh Parsipour creates a “land with no men” utopia, where five women of different ages and social backgrounds – all harmed by a deeply patriarchal society one way or another – come together in an orchard in the outskirts of Tehran to spend their days together in a uniquely safe and creative environment. The story apparently takes place in 1953, during and after the military coup against Iran’s democratically elected prime minister, Mohammad Mosadegh. However, Parsipour’s presentation of her female characters and the challenges and injustices they face in Iranian society are somewhat timeless. Perhaps it is for this reason that the book was banned immediately after publication and the author, who had previously been imprisoned between 1981 and 1985, was rearrested and imprisoned again, accused of ‘writing anti-Islamic texts’.<sup>66</sup> The five

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<sup>63</sup> Moallem 2005, p. 115.

<sup>64</sup> “Da” means “mother” in Lori dialect.

<sup>65</sup> Chandler 2012, p.175. from: <https://www.escholar.manchester.ac.uk/api/datastream?publicationPid=uk-ac-man-scw:191356&datastreamId=FULL-TEXT.PDF>

<sup>66</sup> from [http://www.bbc.com/persian/arts/story/2004/11/041117\\_la-parssipur-bio.shtml](http://www.bbc.com/persian/arts/story/2004/11/041117_la-parssipur-bio.shtml)

women in the novella have suffered from different circumstances, all created directly in relation to men: either their relatives or those who they have crossed paths with by accident. At times Parsipour deploys magical realism to assist her female characters reaching the justice they otherwise would not be able to achieve. Mounes, one of her main characters, for example, is murdered by her brother in an 'honour killing' and buried in the back yard. But then she is born again and also acquires the ability to read other people's minds. In Parsipour's novel, the orchard is a female safe space where her characters come to terms with the horrors and injustices of their past and also realise their inner potential: the owner of the garden, Farokh Lagha, a wealthy woman who was formerly trapped in a loveless marriage for years, seeks to find not only tranquillity, but to become a poet, and although she fails as a poet she find happiness in becoming a socialite.

Another character, Mahdokht, whose family were the previous owners of the orchard, has always wanted to travel the world but never got the opportunity. She had planted herself in the orchard years ago. And by the time that Farokh Lagha buys the garden she has grown into a tall tree. Eventually her dream comes true when her seeds are scattered into the water and she finally gets to travel the world.

The women in the orchard find comfort in each other's company for a while, but they never venture outside of the heteronormative zone to fall in love with one another or to seek eternal happiness in the company of other females. In this sense, the orchard is rather a transitory stage, a space to prepare them for what they are apparently destined to. In the case of Farokh-Lagha and Faezeh, this destiny is marriage. There are spiritual and surreal endings for the other characters, such as Zarrin, the former prostitute who vanishes into thin air, and Mahdokht, the woman-tree who travels the world through her seeds, and Mounes, who in her eternal search for light and truth spends seven years travelling through seven deserts.<sup>67</sup>

### **Prison Memoirs and the Absence of Homosexual Relationships**

Another segregated space in Iranian society which has received much scholarly attention is the Iranian (political) prison. Upon seizing power, the Islamic Iranian regime imprisoned thousands of political activists and oppositional civilians. Thousands were executed, many

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<sup>67</sup> Parsipour, 1991.

without trial and many following short kangaroo trials of just five minutes in length. Many of those who survived and were eventually released (mainly in the late 1980s after the prisons had been 'cleansed' in the 1987 massacre of political prisoners in Iran, during which between 2000 and 12000 people were executed) found it impossible to integrate back into society. Since their families had usually been scattered, they were not allowed to go back to their former jobs and of course many of them were still under pressure and felt unsafe. As a result, many found that they had no other choice than to leave Iran and to live in exile. Eventually, many of the former prisoners decided to write their memoirs. These testimonial and in some cases therapeutical writings vary hugely in form and also in literary aspects. Some are collaborative works by former fellow prisoners which focus on just one subject (for example sexual torture in prisons) but most are written by a single writer who usually recalls memories long before being arrested, sometimes even from their childhood. While many are simply written without much attention to literary technique, a few have been written so eloquently that they can certainly be classified amongst the best works of contemporary Persian literature, such as Mehdi Aslani's prison memoirs *Kalagh va gole sorkh* (*The Crow and the Red Rose*). During the 1990s and the 2000s, prison memoirs became one of the integral aspects of contemporary Persian literature. Besides their great testimonial value (especially considering that the crimes committed by the Iranian regime in prisons have as of yet gone unpunished and the responsible authorities have not been put on trial) they can be trusted as sources for sociological research on different subjects related to Iranian society. In most cases, the authors of the memoirs display a progressive and yet critical perspective on the matters. They are not only critical of the Iranian regime: many of them also show interest in discussing and criticising the power relations and other potentially problematic issues inside the prison and in terms of their relationships with other inmates.

Many challenging topics that the authors might have been less concerned about prior to prison are discussed in detail in the various memoirs – from major topics such as individual rights in relation to group dynamics and power relations inside prisons, to personal details such as the discrimination faced by female prisoners faced during their monthly

menstruation cycles.<sup>68</sup> The presence of these topics, many of which are considered taboo in public discourse, are bravely discussed in many memories and the fact that same-sex relations are an internationally common practice in prisons across the globe and one of the prominent features of many prison memoirs, one might expect to find recurring references to same-sex relations in Iranian prison memoirs, especially considering that most of these are written by Iranian leftists who in principle support LGBT rights. So I started my research almost assured that I would find sufficient evidence of same-sex relations in Iranian prisons during the 1980s. After all, I had come across one example in Shahrnoush Parsipour's prison memoirs, when I had read her book more than a decade ago, and with that example in mind I was confident that I would indeed come across more examples. However, after leafing through more than 30 volumes of prison memoirs written by both male and female political prisoners, Parsipour's reference in her prison memoirs (1996, Baran Sweden) remains the sole evidence of the existence of same-sex relations in Iranian prisons during the 1980s that I could find. In her book, Parsipour mentions a relationship between two *Tawab*<sup>69</sup> prisoners, whom she calls P and F, to protect their identities. These two young girls (18 and 20) used to be sympathisers of the oppositional Islamic group *Mujahedin e Khalgh*. After being arrested, and apparently not under that much pressure (according to Parsipour), they become tawabs. And after giving up the woman who connected them to the party, which led to that woman's execution, in order to prove their loyalty further they take part in a death squad:

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<sup>68</sup> There is a book written on the latter subject *Women's Monthly Cycles in the Islamic Republic of Iran's Prisons* by Azam Shokri (2014).

<sup>69</sup> *Tawab* (originating from the Koranic term *Tawbah*, which means returning (to Allah's path) with repentance applies to those political prisoners who, mostly under physical and psychological pressure, were 'broken' in prison. On top of having to denounce their former political views and organisations, they were sometimes forced to inform (or did so voluntarily) the prison authorities about other prisoners, or they even had to take part in procedures such as assisting in interrogations and so on. In some cases they were even forced to participate in the death squads that executed their former comrades, so as to prove their 'loyalty' to the regime. It was also common for tawabs to become assistant guards inside the prison. Although in many cases the tawabs only agreed to become tawabs in order to rid themselves of the torture and pressure they faced, and although many of them did not go as far as to harm other prisoners, in extreme examples the victims showed all the signs of 'Stockholm syndrome'. This was apparently more common amongst younger prisoners. Becoming a tawab could potentially have additional benefits for the prisoner, which included being released sooner and receiving a reduced sentence. However, becoming a tawab must not be conflated with 'making a deal' with the state – a practice that is common in Western states and which was practiced during the former Iranian regime under the Shah. For the Islamic regime in Iran had introduced the concept of 'Tawbeh' to prisons as a way for the inmates to 'save themselves in the hereafter'. Becoming a tawab would not mean that they would necessarily escape Islamic punishment in this world. As such, their sentences were often not reduced and even after couple of years of intense cooperation, which amongst higher-ranking political prisoners (such as the renowned Hossein Rouhani, the former leader of Peikar) could go as far as giving political strategic advice to the regime, the Tawab would be executed. Iraj Mesdaghi's memoirs are one of the most informative sources for further information on the details of prison during the 1980s.

one of them shoots a 14-year-old girl in the head. After that they are moved to *Ghezelhesar* prison in Karaj where Parsipour is captive. In the new prison, the two young tawabs do anything in their power to put their prison mates in trouble and even lead them to death, just as a way of proving their loyalty. In Parsipour's words, they had turned into "two creatures who acted neither out of remorse nor regret nor as part of a tactical strategy. Rather, fear had turned them into monsters who would do anything to survive."<sup>70</sup> Eventually, Parsipour and others find out that the closeness between P and F is much more than merely emotional closeness and that they are actually together in a relationship. For a long time, despite the two tawabs' continued efforts to get others into trouble and to report them for offences such as not praying on time, laughing when reading the Koran, hiding political poetry in their pillowcases and so on, their secret remains safe with other prisoners. However things soon change: the prison manager, Haj Davoud, who is renowned for his harsh practices inside prison, gathers the prisoners together to hear P and F's accusations against them. The two girls accuse Parsipour's old-aged mother (who had been imprisoned for the crime of being in the same car as her daughter when she was arrested) of corrupting young girls by telling them sexual jokes, and Parsipour herself of corrupting others by trying to "inject communist ideas into their heads". As a result, Parsipour loses her temper and reveals their relationship to Haj Davoud. Parsipour regards this as one of the lowest and despicable moments of her life – a "dirty victory". She writes:

"As a person who had studied sociology and who also believes that all people should have sexual freedom, I didn't take it (their relationship) seriously. It was a personal relationship between two people and it was nobody's business. But fear, fear in the most complicated and indescribable form led these two to stomp on others' feet all the time, and even led to the death of others ... However, I was not allowed to reveal their relationship, if there was even a tiny bit of Christ's manner in me I should have turned the other cheek. But I was brought up in an eye-for-an-eye culture, so instead of observing them in their moments of terror and learn a lesson, I revealed their secret."<sup>71</sup> At first it may seem that same-sex relations are inevitable in a space like prison. The absence of such relations from prison

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<sup>70</sup> Parsipour 1996, p. 186.

<sup>71</sup> It does not seem that Parsipour's revelation had such a hugely negative impact on the prison conditions of the young prison couple, as they were eventually released 2-3 years later, on the exact same day that Parsipour was released.

memoirs may be due to the author's self-censorship and the barriers of the culture within which they are writing. However, a closer look makes it apparent that such relationships were actually not so common after all. First of all, the authors of prison memoirs in Iran are exclusively political prisoners, and this category of prisoners, especially during the 1980s, had their own specific etiquettes of 'personal relationships' (both outside and inside the prisons). These etiquettes were usually clearly delimited and in some cases even strict: particularly when it came to romantic relationships between members of an organisation. Moreover, same-sex relationships were not considered an option: the leftist opposition political organisations usually thought of homosexuality as an illness during the 1970s and 1980s.<sup>72</sup> Simin Dabiri, who was connected to the leftist 'Fadaie' organisation and who was imprisoned during the 1980s, admits that the organisation understood homosexuality as a physical disorder. However, he adds, homosexuality could never have been an obstacle to homosexual people joining the party.<sup>73</sup> As a result, there are not many records of same-sex relations in Iranian political prisons during the 1980s and the only one that is mentioned involves the tawabs, who had given up their former values and, ironically, while prison circumstances were less harsh on them and they had more advantages, they were also more vulnerable.

On the other hand, the incredibly harsh situation faced by political prisoners in the 1980s must also be taken into consideration. As Shahla Shafigh puts it: "In the Islamic prison (in Iran during the 1980s) affection and association between the prisoners is forbidden since it is an act of resistance".<sup>74</sup> Under such circumstances, where even friendly relations between prisoners were considered a threat to the prison authorities, the formation of romantic relations was basically unthinkable. In her article about the memoirs of Iranian prisoners in the 1980s, Shafigh goes through Parviz Osia's memoirs of Tohid Prison and mentions the chapter he wrote on sexual and emotional urges and relations in prison. Summarising his argument, she writes:

"He (Osia) concludes that in prison even in the absence of camphor (a substance usually added to prisoners food supposedly to control their libido), sexual needs cannot really

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<sup>72</sup> Mesdaghi 2015. <http://iranwire.com/features/7690/>

<sup>73</sup> Dabiri 2015.

<sup>74</sup> Shafigh 2004.

surface in such an atmosphere, since on the one hand private spaces don't really exist and, on the other, the prisoners psyche is filled with fear, threat and anxiety which leave no room for sexual desires."<sup>75</sup> This is an excellent summary of the reasons behind the absence of homosexual and same-sex relationships in Iranian prison memoirs.

### **The 1990s and 2000s: The First Traces of LGBT Issues in Contemporary Persian Literature**

The emergence within Persian literature of LGBT characters in the modern sense of the term begins with Iranian exile/diaspora literature. Most writers from the Iranian diaspora are those who have fled Iran due to their political activities or their opposition to the Iranian regime. The first wave of this diaspora fled Iran for the Western countries during the 1980s. This process continued into the 1990s (many who migrated at this point had been incarcerated in Iranian prisons during the 1980s) and was followed by a third wave in the 2000s, especially in the aftermath of the 2009 rebellions in Iran. The first generation of Iranian exiled writers, many of whom were either published writers or otherwise literary and culturally active prior to their exile, were caught in the dichotomy projected onto them due to a variety of factors: first of all, the final outcome of the 1979 revolution (which most of them had participated in with such hope and had also laid the groundwork for it years before with their cultural and political activities,) had utterly disappointed them. Instead of fulfilling their hopes and dreams, the revolution had turned into a tyranny – a killing machine 'devouring its own children' and forcing them out of the country. They were thus forced to re-evaluate their former ideas and to figure out what had gone wrong. In doing so, they became more open to accepting new ideas, which they had come across in the new environments they now lived in. In the Iranian diaspora's literature of the 1990s onwards, many topics that were formerly generally frowned upon by the Iranian intelligentsia were now embraced, and it is at this point that LGBT characters finally make an entrance onto the stage of Persian literature.

Responding to a question about Persian gay literature, Asad Seif, an Iranian literary critic, said:

"Our exiled society, finally, although not easily, agreed not to regard homosexuality as a 'sickness'. Under these new circumstances, Iranian homosexuals could finally come out of

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<sup>75</sup> Shafigh 2005.



the closet. Their courage in breaking these taboos is admirable. It was they who published the first Persian-language gay magazines. This new environment contributed to the creation of (Persian exile) gay literature. Of course, the impact of the translation of books about 'Sexuality' and 'Sexology' into Persian in the recent years should not be underestimated when it comes to the creation of this genre, nor should the effects of international campaigns for gay rights." (Interview with Behjat Omid, *Deutsche Welle* 2014).<sup>76</sup>

One of the admirable efforts to which Seif alludes is the publication of the first Iranian LGBT magazine by Iranian activists in Sweden in November 1990. The magazine was called *Houmaan*, and its first issue consisted of 9 very short articles of around a page each. Its subject matter related to both the Iranian and international LGBT community. For instance, it reported on the death of a gay Swedish writer, described the struggle of a gay Catholic man in Ireland to make his conservative country aware of the problem of AIDs, and criticised the Iranian semi-oppositional leftist party, Fadaeeian Aksariat, for its stance on homosexuality – urging the party to rethink its classification of homosexuality as corrupt and deviant. From its first issue, *Houmaan* showed a keen interest in literature in the form of covering international LGBT literary news and publishing both classical and contemporary poetry by Iranian poets. On occasion, it also translated gay poetry from other languages.

It is important to note that the writers who introduced the first modern LGBT characters into their works, did/do not necessarily self-identify as being LGBT themselves. This creates a terminology dilemma, for their work is not produced by – or exclusively for – the LGBT community, and thus cannot technically be classified as what has become known as 'queer' or 'gay' literature. So despite being pioneers of portraying LGBT issues in stories, some of these works have not been presented to the LGBT community, nor have they received much attention more generally – not even in the handful of articles that discuss LGBT characters in Iranian literature, not least because such articles usually limit themselves to naming works that are written by writers who identify as LGBT. However, it would not at all be wise to dismiss these works as those written from the point of view of an 'outsider', because reading and analysing these works provides a unique insight into the fundamental change of perspective that Iranian writers (who in return represent important layers of Iranian society more generally) have gone through when it comes to understanding modern homosexuality.

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<sup>76</sup> [http://iran-women-solidarity.net/spip.php?page=print&id\\_article=2789](http://iran-women-solidarity.net/spip.php?page=print&id_article=2789)

### ***Bitter Summer* and Contrasting Same-Sex Relations**

Asad Seif introduces Reza Allamehzadeh's *Bitter Summer* (*Tabestaneh Talkh*) as the first work of Iranian literature to feature a modern gay character. I was unable to locate an example that predates Alamezadeh's book.

Hadi, the narrator of the story, is a careless and playful teenager who is also interested in writing fiction. He works a summer job in the clothing section of a big department store in Tehran, where he meets another sales assistant, Firouz. Somewhat younger than Hadi, Firouz is described as shy and fragile. In a brotherly fashion, Hadi is quite protective of him. Firouz eventually falls in love with Hadi. Hadi notices that Firouz's general behaviour has changed, but ascribes this to Firouz having fallen for their female co-worker.

"I asked:

'Who have you fallen in love with? Miss Zare'?"

His bitter smile in reply meant: 'Don't talk nonsense'. I asked:

'Who is it then? Trust me Firouz! We are friends!'

He opened his eyes. When he saw I was looking at him he closed them again. He was about to break out in tears. He turned and put his head on my chest and shivering with fear and doubt, he finally said:

'I am in love with you'.

And his tears dropped on my chest. I let him cry and let it all out. I too had closed my eyes, I tried to think of nothing and no one. What else was there for me to do? What other reaction could I have other than to pretend I did not understand what he had just said? ... It seemed like Firouz did not know what to do either. He had said what was in his heart and instead of feeling released he felt trapped, he regretted it already. Or maybe he was seeing himself at the beginning of a path which he knew nothing of, he had only thought of this first step..."<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> *Bitter Summer*, p. 14.

Despite Firouz's confession and Hadi's lack of interest, they remain friends and even become closer – a closeness that continues even when eventually Hadi meets a young girl and she becomes an important part of his life. Following this, most of his discussions with revolve around the girl, Akhtar. However Hadi's relationship with Akhtar does not last: they are caught kissing in the toilet of a cinema and taken to the police station. Akhtar's furious family move away from the area and Hadi loses track of her. After this incident, heartbroken, Hadi becomes even closer to Firouz and one day when they are at a public bath, after being soaped by the bathhouse assistant, they enter a private showering space together where Hadi passionately kisses Firouz. Soon after this incident, Hadi and Firouz participate in a teacher's strike in Tehran and Firouz gets arrested. The next day, when Hadi and Firouz's father go to the youth detention centre to bail him out, they discover that he has committed suicide in the showers. Firouz had taken his own life because the night before he had been raped by one of the detention centre's officers in a grotesque space decorated to resemble a wedding chapel.

To this date, Allamehzadeh's 74-page long novella is one of the most comprehensive works of contemporary literature when it comes to Iranian LGBT issues.<sup>78</sup> Throughout the story, the narrator offers two contrasting types of same-sex relations, making apparent two radically different understandings of homosexuality in Iran.

First, Alamehzadeh presents characters which remind the reader of the non-equal same-sex relation that has been practiced in Iran for hundreds of years. This practice has various faces, two of which we find outlined in Allamehzadeh's book. The first comes in the form of the confectioner, Agha Morteza, who works in the same department store as Firouz and Hadi. He is attracted to Firouz and tries to win him over by giving him sweets and chocolates. Morteza's intentions are no secret to his co-workers or even to Hadi, and Firouz avoids Morteza like the plague. Agha Morteza occasionally touches and kisses Firouz on the cheeks, but does not attempt anything further. As is commonly the case in this kind of same-sex relation, he must lure the boy into a sexual relationship, which he does not manage to do in the end. The second form is the officer who rapes Firouz in the detention centre; he is a modern version of non-consensual same-sex practices which were based on the absolute abuse of power relations that has a long history of paedophilia and raping

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<sup>78</sup> <http://reza.malakut.org/archives/bitter%20summer%20%28complete%20novel%29.pdf>

other young prisoners. Not only does the officer not hide this, he boasts to his colleagues about his 'victories' in a manner that is reminiscent of 19<sup>th</sup> century Iranian writers' descriptions of their sexual relations with young boys (such as in Iraj Mirza's early poetry, for instance).

On the other hand, despite Allamehzadeh's stereotypical description of Firouz's physical features and character (that is to say, his generally 'feminine' beauty and manners), he manages to save his character from being a traditional 'pretty boy' and 'passive' partner in sex, or from becoming a modern day '*Amrad*'. Although Firouz lives in a traditional society in the 1950s, he has the moral courage to be true to himself about his feelings and express them. Moreover, not only does he not allow men like Morteza to take advantage of him because of his sexual orientation, he goes as far as to take his own life after he has been raped. Perhaps this represents Allamehzadeh's attempt to form a clear distinction in the (presumably traditional) reader's mind between modern homosexuality and the traditional forms of same-sex practices.

Moreover, Allamehzadeh challenges heteronormative understandings of sexual behaviour and orientation: Hadi, the main character and the narrator of the story, seems to be a 'straight' teenager who is interested in girls. And while kissing Firouz under the shower might at first seem an act of frustration at his stalled heterosexual relationship, it becomes clear that Hadi is also attracted to Firouz on some level, often thinking of him and wondering:

'In the past one month that I had not seen Firouz, not a day went by that I hadn't thought of him, and exactly for this reason I refused to go and see him. I felt that my interest for seeing him was too intense to be normal ... even in comparison with my urge to see Akhtar...'.<sup>79</sup>

All in all, and despite its shortcomings and occasional ambiguities, Allamehzadeh's book and both of his characters, Hadi and Firouz, is a key milestone for LGBT issues in modern Iranian literature.

### **The 2000s: LGBT Literature in Virtual Spaces**

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<sup>79</sup> *Bitter Summer*, p. 44.

LGBT communities appeared in Iran as soon as the internet became a means of mass communication at the beginning of the new millennium. The dominant form of virtual LGBT communities were weblogs, which for almost a decade – prior to social media such as Facebook, Twitter, Tango etc becoming so popular – were at the heart of the Iranian LGBT community. Personal weblogs became popular as early as 2001 and in a few years Farsi was the fourth most-used language in the blogging world<sup>80</sup>. The online spaces provided an opportunity for many LGBT people who lived inside Iran to at least have the opportunity to ‘come out’ virtually, to share their experiences, hopes and fears with other members of the community under a pseudonym. On the other hand, it became feasible for Iranian LGBT activists who were based outside Iran to try to promote LGBT awareness through their websites, online magazines and so on. Soon, with the relative protection that the virtual space provided, many from inside Iran were also able to cooperate with other members of the LGBT community in various forms. According to the LGBT magazine *Cheragh*,<sup>81</sup> the first Iranian gay weblog was *Epsilon Gay*, with its first post uploaded in February 2003. There were others that were created around this time, and for a period of around 2 years (2003-5) these blogs were free in Iran, but after that the government started to filter homosexual blogs – a practice that continues to this day. These blogs featured posts related to the authors’ personal experiences and daily occurrences and some of them tried to provide their readers with LGBT related news and information.

Occasionally, poetry and stories would also appear in between the posts. Most of the initial blogs, created in early 2005, are now deactivated and inaccessible, either as a result of being banned by a Persian blog server or because their authors have stopped updating them. However, these have been replaced by similar weblogs, and despite the emergence of other forms of virtual communication, LGBT weblogs have kept their place amongst users: short stories, longer stories (which are published as a series of posts) and most of all poetry are common features of these newer blogs.

The internet also solved the problem of the Iranian LGBT diaspora reaching an audience inside Iran; at least 3 online magazines were published in the virtual space during the 2000s to this date. Unlike their predecessor, *Houman* magazine, they did not face the problem of

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<sup>80</sup> <http://www.ta3lim.ir/Post/9>

<sup>81</sup> <http://irqo.org/cheragh/article/a-48.html>

reaching an audience inside Iran, however it should be considered that access to Internet has been restricted by class and cultural barriers, especially in the early 2000s, when the internet was mostly accessible to middle and upper class people in larger cities only. Despite these barriers, however, online magazines and websites flourished.

The first LGBT Iranian online magazine, *Maha*, was produced between 2005 and 2007. Unlike *Houman*, which was published in exile during the 1990s and could not easily reach its potential readers in Iran, *Maha* was published with the aim of raising the awareness of Iranian homosexuals<sup>82</sup> by publishing written articles on basic LG issues. Afary writes:

“What made the journal such a ground breaking publication was its discussion of homosexual relations within contemporary Iranian society and of the many ways in which closeted homosexuality also affected heterosexual marriages. *MAHA* was fearless in challenging the state’s prohibition of homosexuality, writing for example, that many religious texts recognized the rights of a man to have sex with a little girl, but not the right to consensual homosexual relations between adults.”<sup>83</sup>

During the two years of its existence, *Maha* usually reserved a page or two for poetry and short stories. In its tenth issue (October 2005) *Maha* announced a short story competition. Only six stories were submitted to the magazine (and at least one of them was written by a contributor to the magazine). The small number of entries surprised the editorial board.<sup>84</sup> 5 of the stories have gay characters and one is written in form of love letter by a lesbian character to her former teacher. These stories, written by homosexuals who have grown up and lived in Iran, cover different subjects reflecting the problems and barriers Iranian LGs face in that society and they also provide a picture of different aspects of their daily lives and communities and relationships: such as male prostitution (*Bisarzamin/Landless*), social pressures on homosexuals for heterosexual marriage, fear of being prosecuted and executed (*Eteraf/Confession*), feeling guilty for being homosexual (*Cheshmcheran/ The Voyeur*) and so on, but they also depict romantic homosexual relations such as in *Molaghat/The Date*. The characters in the different stories have developed different levels of homosexual self-awareness. While some of them are fully self-aware and confident of

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<sup>82</sup> <http://www.cheraq.net/42/hamzad.htm>

<sup>83</sup> Afary 2009, 352

<sup>84</sup> <https://majalehmaha.files.wordpress.com/2008/03/vijehnameh-dastan-maha-11.pdf>

their identity, others appear unable to set themselves free from the impact of Iranian society's hegemonic ideologies and accept themselves for who they are. For instance, Reza, a homosexual character in *Voyeur*, sees his homosexuality as an illness and hates himself for it. The story takes place during the Ashura rituals, the Muslim Shia religious ceremonies to commemorate the death of Hussein, the prophet's grandson. During the ceremony, Reza, who has initially portrayed as a man who is merely there to look at other men (hence the title of the story) and is totally at peace with his sexual orientation, eventually reveals his inner fears when he is asked by the father of a disabled boy to pray that his son's disability will be healed:

"When I saw that everybody else was talking to Imam Hussein, all asking for their prayers to come true, I thought 'why shall not I do the same?'

I told Imam Hussein:

'Hello lord, do you remember me? It is me, Reza, the little boy who used to wear black for you and mourn ... look how much I've grown now ... I swear my lord I am the same innocent little boy ... but look! I don't even wear black for you anymore ... I am here so you can see what a degenerate I have turned into ... to tell you I am no more that innocent boy ...'

Then I started crying, I wanted to tell him that I am into men ... That I am one of those he hates ... That I am going to go to hell ... I wasn't the only one who was crying, everybody was crying, I don't understand what pained all the rest ... I told the lord: 'lord, all those who are destined for heaven say that I am sick. Lord! I swear I don't want to be this way ... I like men ... If you are going to call me sick as well go on, say I'm sick, but then cure me ... there are two sick people currently sitting in this *Tekyeh* (the location for the Ashura religious ceremony), the boy in the wheelchair and me ... My lord ... cure me...'”<sup>85</sup>

Despite the underwhelming number of received stories, *Maha's* call for an online LGBT literary festival was in no way a failure: not only because of the informative and valuable stories it received, but because this tradition was continued by others, in different forms, after *Maha* stopped publishing. In later years, the Iranian LGBT magazines *Cheragh*, *Neda* and *Aghaliyat* all dedicated some of their pages to poetry and fiction, especially *Cheragh*

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<sup>85</sup> <https://majalehmaha.files.wordpress.com/2008/03/vijehnameh-dastan-maha-11.pdf>

(the official publication of the Iranian Queer Organization, IRQO), whose editor-in-chief was the poet Saghi Ghahreman.

In 2009, at the same time as Tehran's international book fair, an alternative online book fair took place. The report by Small Media describes it as follows:

"Ketabkhaneh88, an online queer (*degarbash* in Farsi) book fair supported from outside Iran by gay rights activist and lesbian poet Saghi Ghahreman, was uploaded to coincide with the opening of Tehran's International Book Fair in May 2009. The idea came from inside Iran, from a gay poet who said to Saghi: 'Alternative literature is censored by the Ministry of Culture and Guidance, but gay literature is prohibited from even being sent to the Ministry; we are non-existent, even in literature.'"<sup>86</sup>

The Ketabkhaneh88 book fair led to the birth of the Iranian queer publication *Gilgamishan* in 2009. *Gilgamishan* introduces itself as follows: "*Gilmamishan* is a publication which specialises in Iranian queer issues. This publication aims to provide opportunities for the Iranian homosexual community, which has been deprived of publishing their works due to governmental and cultural censorship and homophobia."<sup>87</sup> As of November 2015, the publication boasts 39 books, 70% of which are poetry; there are currently two novels, a collection of short stories and two books which consist of a mix of poems and short stories available via the publication's website. There are a few translations of, and a book on, Iraj Mirza's poetry.

Besides LGBT magazines and *Gilgamishan*, several Iranian magazines and media based outside of Iran, have paid attention to, and tried to promote, Iranian LGBT literature. A prominent example is the website of *Radio Zamaneh* (based in the Netherlands), which features a permanent *Degarbash* (*Queer*) section. Zamaneh's *Degarbash* page introduces new LGBT publications, reviews them and interviews the authors on a regular basis.<sup>88</sup>

### The Emergence of 'Gay' Novels/Novellas in Persian Literature

Against the backdrop of numerous short stories, the majority of which are written by experimental writers both on LGBT blogs and Magazines (*Maha*, *Cheragh* and *Neda*), Persian

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<sup>86</sup> Small Media Report, 2012

<sup>87</sup> [http://www.gilgamishaan-books.org/main/?page\\_id=79](http://www.gilgamishaan-books.org/main/?page_id=79)

<sup>88</sup> <http://www.radiozamaneh.com/category/lgbt>



literature has recently witnessed the birth of the gay novel. Various sources refer to several books as the first Iranian Gay novel. Some of them have the writer's personal sexual orientation (and whether this is publicly declared or not) in mind when they do so, leading them to suggest the following as the first embodiment of the gay novel:

*Ghahvehkhaneh/Teahouse* by Khashayar Khaste (a pen name, 2010); *Pirahane Rangrazan* by Janan mirzadeh (a pen name, 2010) and even *Pesarane Eshgh/Sons of love* by Ghazi Rabihavi (2010). To this list we must add Payam Feili's *Man sabz mishavam miveh midaham anjir/ I Will Grow, I Will Bear Fruits... Figs* (Gardoun 2010). Arguments around the first gay novel are rather futile because – strange as this may seem – all of the above novels were published in the same year. Moreover, it is unclear whether *Ghahvehkhaneh*, a story of just 20 pages, can be classified as either a novel or novella. Nevertheless, from a literary perspective, and by taking the author's sexual orientation out of the equation, the first work of Iranian literature that portrays a modern Iranian gay character (and a bisexual one at that) remains Allamehzadeh's 1996 *Tabestane Talkh/Bitter Summer*. This has already been discussed, so I will now provide a short overview of the three significant novels of Iranian gay literature: Mirzadeh's *Pirhane Rangrazan*, Feili's *I will grow...* and Rabihavi's *Sons of Love*.

Coming in at 214 pages, Janan Mirzadeh's novel *Pirhane Rangrazan* is the longest gay novel in Persian literature. It is simple and straight forward, similar to a classic realist novel, but nonetheless features a surreal beginning and ending which are both out of step with the rest of the story. In the first part, a third person narrator follows Sepehr, a young middle class Iranian musician in Vienna. The second part is about Sepehr's return to, and life in, Tehran, which it is narrated by Sepehr himself. In the third section, Sepehr moves to Turkey in the hope of finding his former lover and his sister. This section is written in a second-person narrative, similar to a letter addressing Sepehr. From the beginning of the story, Sepehr is self-conscious of his sexual orientation and is at peace with it. However, he tries to hide it from people who he is socially engaged with, and fearful for the potential consequences that may follow. *Pirhane Rangrazan* is the story of Sepehr's endeavours to find love, inner tranquillity and happiness. Similar to most other Iranian gay stories, the main character of Mirzadeh's book also tries to achieve this individually and does not engage in social or political activities – neither in Vienna nor when he goes back to Tehran.

The narrator of the story, reminding the reader of 19<sup>th</sup> century novels, occasionally interrupts Sepehr's story to make a point, explain a notion, and sometimes even to analyse poetry. This has resulted in some sections of the book sometimes appearing more like a newspaper article than a novel. Throughout the story, the reader is made familiar with the author's point of view on various social, political and literary matters; his ideas about formation of Iranian nationalism and identity, Shia'ism, the Iranian political diaspora, the scientific effects of marijuana on the brain, artistic intellectual communities in Iran, the correct method of reading Hafez's poems and much more besides. This style of writing is as significant in making the book stand out from mainstream Iranian literature in 2000s as is its topic. And while it takes some getting used to the narrator's chattiness and interruptions, many of the points that are made are interesting from a sociological perspective – especially when the topic discussed is homosexuality in Iran.

It is apparent the author has profound knowledge of the Persian language's structure, grammar, vocabulary and classic Persian poetry, and has even proposed a few new words in his book (for example: *Sar-rast* as an equivalent for straight/heterosexual). The character of Sepehr and other characters in the book are also well formed and believable and the story is extremely exciting.

An excerpt:

"Sepehr exits. He does not know how he can get to his own place, so he starts walking. He enters the first travel agency he comes upon and buys a ticket for the first available flight to Tehran.

Sepehr is running away, running away from a dead-end situation which he equates with the city itself. For Sepehr, running away from Vienna means putting an end to a dead-end and trying a new path which may not be a dead-end after all, and, he can't remember anymore, that once upon a time, this very same city, Vienna, provided a chance for him to run away from the dead-end he was caught in, in Tehran. For Sepehr, Vienna means Nihat (his gay lover). He thinks he'll never be able to walk in Vienna's streets or even go to the university without him, or forget about the flat they shared together. He wants to go to Tehran to escape having to see these sketches in Vienna. But even though he won't have to see them again, the memories will remain fresh in his mind. Maybe if he stayed, he could eventually

blunt the edges of images, load them with new memories, but with his escape, Vienna will always keep its sharp edge. Sepehr will take Vienna back to Tehran with him, and with his eternal roaming in her streets, he will for ever scrape his own thoughts.

Maybe if he continued his academic musical education, he could rebuild his disturbed mind, which was discussed previously, but alas! He is escaping from that as well ... Sepehr is running away from himself.”<sup>89</sup>

Prior to the publication of *Sons of Love* in 2010, Rabihavi was mainly known in the Iranian literary community for his novels about the Iran-Iraq war, written from an anti-war position. His novel *Sons of Love* takes place in a similar period, a few years either side of the Iranian revolution, and follows the life events of its main character Jamil, who is born into a traditional polygamous family in the south of Iran. Jamil’s mother was killed when he was an infant as a result of a plot by his father’s other wives. Yet life becomes even more complicated for the teenager Jamil when he finds out about his sexual orientation and falls in love with Naji, a farmer teenager.

Asad Seif has the following to say about it:

“The writer has managed to escape dominant literary trends (within Iranian literary society). He has employed form and technique as the story requires, not the readers ... unlike the common theme in contemporary Persian stories, where the characters are usually limited to educated middle class people and the topics are usually about their family quarrels, the main characters in *Sons of Love* are commoners. One of them is a farmer and the other a teenager who has dropped out of school ... And the topic is about a forbidden love, a love that is not yet spoken of and which is not recognised by society.”<sup>90</sup>

Similarly to Allamehzadeh in *Bitter Summer*, Rabihavi tries to clarify (probably for the benefit of his average Iranian reader’s probable misunderstanding of the term *Hamjensgera* (homosexual)) the difference between homosexual consensual love and paedophilia and rape:

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<sup>89</sup> Pirhane Rangrazan, pp. 60-61.

<sup>90</sup> <http://www.roozonline.com/persian/news/newsitem/article/-d3f401650e.html>

“Jamil liked Naji. He didn’t know why that was, but he liked to watch him as he paddled, maybe because as he paddled his boat he would sing; his voice wasn’t great, but his courage in raising his voice and singing songs Jamil had never heard before was something new. But prior to this they had never talked. Naji said:

‘I know you. You sit on the pier and read books.’

Jamil’s stepmother appeared to be nodding off in the distance and not paying attention to them. Jamil answered:

‘My father wants me to be literate because I am his only son.’

‘I was the only son of the family too, before my mother died, but afterwards my father remarried and then I wasn’t the only son, because the new wife gave birth to three more.’

Jamil looked around and asked: ‘Who did you come with now? Your father’s wife?’

‘Nope! She’ll kill me if she finds out I’ve come here’ and he looked around, fearfully.

Jamil asked: ‘Is it your first time too? Seeing a wedding with musicians and a dancer?’

‘No, not the first time, but these are better than the others I’ve seen.’

Jamil asked: ‘Which one of them did you wish to be?’

‘The violinist of course. See how well he plays and does not look at anybody else, he has to give all his attention to his instrument...’

Jamil’s (step)mother looked at them, she was covering her mouth and nose with her black veil as if an unpleasant odour was in the air.

‘Won’t your mother mind you talking to me?’

‘Why should she mind?’

‘My father’s wife says I am not a good boy, she says no mother wants her son to befriend me, because I am corrupt.’

‘Corrupt?’

‘That’s what my father’s wife says ...’

Jamil stared into his brown eyes in silence, he imagined that he was looking into the most beautiful eyes he had ever seen ... and what beautiful brows ...

Naji said: ‘Because once I took the tweezers and plucked a few of my eyebrows ...’.<sup>91</sup>

Amongst the books mentioned above, Payam Feili’s *I Will Grow; I Will Bear Fruit... Figs* has gained the most recognition, and has been translated to English and also Hebrew. Unlike writers like Khashayar Khasteh, literature appears to be Feili’s predominant concern. Prior to the novella, he wrote and published several collections of his poetry and also another novella (*Castles and Pounds*) both outside and inside Iran. What sets Feili’s book apart from other Iranian gay literature is that he has not set out to write a gay story – he is not intentionally writing to discuss the life of a gay person or the social and cultural barriers Iranian homosexuals face; he does not try to over-explain the sexual orientation of his characters, but rather strongly declares it in the very beginning of his novel. He then continues with the rest of his story in which the characters’ sexual orientation is merely one of the factors that constructs the story – and not the only one. Below is Sara Khalili’s English translation of the first chapter of the novel:

“ONE

I am twenty one. I am a homosexual. I like the afternoon sun.

My Apartment is in the outskirts of town. Near the wharf. In a place that is the realm of seashells, the realm of corals, adjacent to the eternal sorrow of the turtles.

My mother lives in the waters. In the remains of an old ship. On a bed of seaweed. Her hair blazes like a silver crown above her head. My mother is always naked. She visits me every now and then. At my apartment in the outskirts of town.

She first crosses the wharf. She floats in the scattered scents of the bazaar. Then she pays a visit to the crowd of fishermen in the seaside cafés. Among their wares, a hidden pearl. And she leaves them and heads for my bed. Of course, along this entire route, she is no less naked.

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<sup>91</sup> *Pesarane Eshgh/Sons of Love.*

Poker; that is what I call him. He is my only friend. We met during military training. He is twenty-one. He likes the afternoon sun and he is not a homosexual.

I consider this a threat. I have never talked to anyone about my sexual inclination. In fact, I hide it. Even from my few sexual partners. With them, I pretend it is my first such experience.

My sexual partners are night prowlers. Strangers. Poker is not a night prowler. Poker is not a stranger. And this is chipping away at me from inside!”<sup>92</sup>

Payam Feili’s poetical language has been preserved in the English language translation as well, conveying the surrealism and minimalism of the original Farsi. Jamie Osborn describes Feili’s book as follows:

“From this comparatively simple beginning emerges a picture of a tormented young man struggling to come to terms not only with his sexuality, with what he feels to be the feminine nature inside him, but his past, his relationship with his mother, and above all his pathetic – or tragic – closeness to the man he loves and cannot have. The tale is told with an intimacy that combines personal intensity with more general, wide-ranging comment on what it means to be gay in a society where homosexuality is punishable by beatings or even death. The narrator questions his position with a measure of objectivity without losing any immediacy of feeling, asking for example why it is that ‘I sometimes even feel emotions that are specific to mothers.’ The reflectiveness achieved is conveyed through a kind of intoxicated connection to history, as the narrator talks to, even makes love to, the pharaoh Akhenaten, and, through a complex network of symbols, explores the status of the Jewish state in the Middle East and its parallels to his own plight.”<sup>93</sup>

Besides these books and stories, there are other contemporary Iranian short stories and novels that portray same-sex relations or LGBT characters. A few examples are: *Vale Oja* (2011, Berlin) by Mohammad Norouzi (same-sex relations between teenager boys in a rural area); *Azar, Shahdokht, Parviz va digaran/Azar, Shahdokht, Parviz and Others* (2011, Tehran) by Marjan Shirmohammadi (Azar, the main character of the story has separated from her British husband after finding out that he is bisexual), *Takhaye ashegh/Lover Vines* (2004,

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<sup>92</sup> <http://payamfeili.blogspot.co.uk/>

<sup>93</sup> <http://themissingslate.com/2015/10/23/i-will-grow-i-will-bear-fruit/>

Stockholm)<sup>94</sup> by Noshin Shahrokhi (which portrays two gay characters Shahab and Jamshid, who are struggling to accept their sexual orientation and, despite their love for each other, end up in heterosexual marriages). Same-sex and homosexual relations have also appeared in works of writers with Iranian origins who write in languages other than Persian, such as Sara Farizan's *If you could be mine* (2013), published in English, which is about the relationship between two lesbian teenagers in Tehran.

### **Biases and Misunderstandings**

It is important to note that in Iranian literature same-sex relations and LGBT characters are presented from different perspectives, not all of which are positive, sympathetic or constructive. Many of the stories' portrayal of the LGBT characters is completely biased (this is more common within publications inside Iran). What might seem surprising and even shocking is that this bias is common to two, seemingly very different layers of the Iranian literary society, that is to say, between some of the highly religious writers and secular-liberal writers. This is a slightly odd overlap, given that the latter are best-known for their opposition to Iranian state's cultural policies. Amongst the first group, the homophobia is direct and hostile, stemming from the author's religious/traditional mind-set, which denounces homosexuality as a sin and as a sign of decadence.

The second group of writers' homophobia is sometimes merely the reflection of the general anti-homosexual sentiment that is common in Iranian society and which classifies it as a sickness and so on. This group is unable to differentiate between the traditional non-equal same-sex relation, paedophilia (which was discussed in detail in previous chapters) and modern consensual homosexuality. At times this bias is probably just a result of a sheer misunderstanding of the modern LGBT community, with an author who has never encountered an LGBT person in real life attempting to create an 'exotic' LGBT character. An illustrative example is the portrayal of Azar's ex-husband in Shirmohammadi's novel, where the author demonstrates her absolute misunderstanding of bisexuality, portraying Philip (Azar's ex-husband) as a man who has fallen in love with his male student (in a British university) and has tried to convince his heterosexual wife that the three of them should live together from now on, 'because he is bisexual', as Azar's mother puts it. Other than the

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<sup>94</sup> This book is translated to and published in German as *Unerfüllte Träume einer Iranerin* (*An Iranian Woman's Unfulfilled Dreams*).

comical portrayal of bisexuality (assuming that a bisexual man desires to live with a man and a woman at the same time), the writer deploys Philip's 'bisexuality' as the main twist of the novel: for two-thirds of the novel, the reader has to keep speculating about what exactly has happened between Azar and Phillip that she cannot tell her family. How embarrassing or horrific could it be that is even above the tolerance of a seemingly modern, non-religious Iranian family?

Shirmohammadi's portrayal of Philip and bisexuality might be an unfortunate result of a lack of knowledge, but in other cases Iranian secular, liberal writers have clearly stated their opposition to homosexual relations and even used homosexuality as a derogatory term to undermine others. Ebrahim Golestan (1922-) is perhaps one of the most significant Iranian contemporary writers. He has exerted a huge influence on the Iranian cultural sphere and literary spaces for over half a decade (as a result of various factors, from pioneering the introduction of Ernest Hemingway's writing style into Farsi, his translations and films, his family's heritage and even his affair with the well-known Iranian poet Forough Farukhzad), to the extent that he has a cult following in Iran. In a 2011 interview with *Tajrobeh*, a literary magazine in Tehran, he was asked about Iranian intellectual café culture. Suddenly, Golestan shifted the discussion to Mario Vargas Llosa, the Latin American winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature, humiliating him for his sexual orientation:

**Interviewer:** No, I don't really go to cafés, but you yourself were a regular until 1949!

**Ebrahim Golestan:** If I did it was to meet the guys, I really adored Hedayat and Rahmatallhi and I would meet them there (in Tehran's cafés). Nobody reads Rahmatallhi's books any more ... it is that *mardak* (*mardak* is a strongly derogatory term in Persian which means little or petite man) the homosexual, right winger from Latin America who wanted to become President of his country ...

(What is interesting is that the interviewer glosses over Golestan's humiliation of Llosa for his sexual orientation, but is perturbed by Golestan's notion that Llosa was a rightwinger, which for the interviewer is synonymous with liberalism). Accordingly, the interview then continues ...



**Interviewer:** Now that you've brought up the issue of the right ... Do you have a problem with liberalism?<sup>95</sup>

This comment is merely one of many example that shows how even the intellectuals who are known as critics of the Iranian state and its discriminatory, repressive politics, can be straightforwardly homophobic. Not only is this common, but it is not even seen as a problematic issue that other cultural activists, writers and literary critics would deign to comment on.

### **What about lesbians, bisexuals and transsexuals in literature?**

While it is true that lesbian, bisexual and transsexual Iranians have generally been less active in online spaces and in writing LGBT literature, by no means does this mean that they are absolutely absent and non-existent, or that LBT characters have never featured in works of fiction. From the formation of the Iranian LGBT community, Iranian lesbian writers have tended more towards poetry than fiction. Saghi Ghahreman's poetry is considered as part of the avant-garde of Iranian poetry and is well-known in the Iranian literary sphere, beyond the LGBT community as well. One of its main characteristics is its tendency toward feminine erotica. Another example is Elham Malekpour. Prior to being published by *Gilgamishian* in Canada, her poetry book, *Jamaica is also a Country*, had gained a publishing permit by the Iranian Ministry of Islamic Guidance and Culture. According to an Iranian LGBT blogger: 'This permission was probably granted because the book's multiple meanings are extremely veiled and, as the above testimonies highlight, are not easily understood, even by the target audience.'<sup>96</sup>

This vagueness and ambiguity is also a characteristic of Saghi Ghahreman's poetry. Unlike most Iranian LGBT fiction, which is simple in form and style, and in contrast with the general literary preferences of Iranian literary society during the 1990s and 2000s, Iranian LGBT poetry is similar to the mainstream Iranian poetry of the 1990s and 2000s, with its interest in formalism. Iranian literary lesbianism in its non-poetical form has mostly appeared in blog posts and LGBT magazines in the form of experimental short stories. Another format in which lesbian fictional characters has appeared in is online experimental novels. These are

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<sup>95</sup> *Tajrobeh*, issue 5, September 2011. Available at: <http://www.tajrobehmag.com/article/774>

<sup>96</sup> <http://smallmedia.org.uk/lgbtrepublic.pdf>

novels published by authors who are mostly Iranian residents, and they identify their interest in literature mostly as a 'hobby'. Most of these writers are females who publish their works in literary forums. I have come upon more than one example of female same-sex relations and lesbian characters in these books, although mostly the descriptions are quite vague. In one of these books,<sup>97</sup> the main character keeps recalling her memories with her best friend who was a lesbian and who committed suicide years before the events of the story took place.

Another example is a short story published in the LGBT magazine *Neda*. It is written in eight short episodes and is called *Eight Episodes of Saba's life*. Here is episode number 5:<sup>98</sup>

"I am driving towards Karaj ... Zahra lights two cigarettes; we do not speak. She puts her hand on mine, I look at her and we both smile. We get caught in Gohardasht's traffic jam, the guys in the car next to us are staring into our car, Zahra takes her hand away from mine, supposedly to rearrange her headscarf; I moan: 'Let them look all they want!'. She looks at herself in the mirror and replies:

'I don't like it.'

'Then throw away your cigarettes too!' I reply.

'That's my own business!'

'But where you place your hand is not your own business?'

'For God's sake, stop arguing!'

She is right; I am arguing for no reason; here everything is everybody's business."

Besides giving the reader an image of an Iranian middle class lesbian's everyday life, this story – and similar ones – demonstrate the changing features of acceptable patterns of social behaviour. It is suggested in this story that the former patterns of traditional homosociality, in which physical contact between two people of the same sex was totally acceptable, is beginning to change – at least in some layers of Iranian society. Besides

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<sup>97</sup> I am reluctant to provide the name of the author and the book in this case, since the author is apparently writing under her real name and lives in Iran and may not wish for unnecessary attention to be drawn to her life and writing.

<sup>98</sup> <http://www.nedamagazine.net/society/saba1.htm>

poetry and short stories, there are countless numbers of pornographic lesbian stories written in Persian: with one simple Google search, hundreds of these stories appear, most of which seem to be copies and translations of Western pornographic texts which have been sloppily translated into Persian, with the names of the characters replaced by Persian names.

There are very few examples of references to Bisexuals and Transgender people/Transsexuals in Persian literature.<sup>99</sup> In Janan Mirzadeh's novel, *Pirhane Rangrazan*, there is a character with potential bisexual qualities. Bahman has a sexual relationship with Sepehr, the main character, for a while, but he classifies himself as 'straight' – as does Sepehr. This is an excerpt from the story:

"It was dark when I returned home, I slept, I dreamt that Bahman and I were the only people on earth, and he's got no one but me. I woke up a couple of times before dawn, but I preferred to go back to sleep, to the same dream rather than wait until morning when he was supposed to call ... I would go back to sleep and dream that we are all alone in a forest cottage in the north (of Iran) and then we'd climb up the mountain, and half way to the peak we would stay and light a bonfire and make tea ...

By 12 noon I could wait no more. I sent him a text message: 'How long do I have to wait?' five minutes later he replied: 'Don't wait. I couldn't love you. Let it go, be happy.'"<sup>100</sup>

There are a few anonymous short stories on the web which portray bisexual characters – often as erratic and chaotic individuals. One example is a short story published on a literature weblog called *Hamjens19*.<sup>101</sup> Published in April 2012, the story is simply called *Bisexual* and it seems as if it has been written as homework for a creative writing course. The story is quite a cliché take on a bisexual person's life: the main character of the story, Shalizeh, is in love with a woman and a man at the same time. She has decided to marry her boyfriend, but she remains in love with her girlfriend as well and is trying to find the courage to tell her the truth. She is also hiding her love for Mahtab from her husband to be:

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<sup>99</sup> Iranian law accepts transsexuals and their right to undergo sex-change operations. Iranian cinema has in many instances portrayed transsexual characters. The movie *Mirrors in Front* is an example.

<sup>100</sup> *Pirhane Rangrazan*, p. 138.

<sup>101</sup> <http://hamjens19.persianblog.ir/post/7/>

"I couldn't leave without telling her what I had come to say; I took a pen and a paper and wrote:

'My Dear Mahtab,

I don't know whether or not this was the last time we will see each other ... It all depends on you. Sooner or later you'll find out that I am going to get married. You know better than anybody else that continuing like this is not possible for me any more, for the reasons you know very well ... You were the person who I got to know love with and I spent the best moments of my life with you, and no one can take away these memories, no one. I know it is me who is breaking our promises, but all my hope is that you still be there for me. I assure you that my marriage will not affect our relationship in any way and that we can stay together for ever. I will wait for your decision.

Shalizeh'

I put the letter on the desk and put our picture on top of it."

In a book recently published inside Iran, we come across another bisexual character. The book is entitled *Azar, Parviz, Shahdokht and others* and it has also been made into a movie.

There are several Persian novels which portray transgender characters; one of them is the novella *Sayeha/Shadows* (2005) by Manzar Hosseini, which takes place inside a mental health asylum outside of Iran. One of the patients has transgender tendencies. In the novella *Banafsheye Sefid/ White Violet* (2013)<sup>102</sup>, by Yasaman Nesa, the reader encounters 'Reza' – a character with whom the main character of the story, Ava, is in love. In the beginning, 'Reza' believes that she is a transsexual and is thinking of undergoing a sex-change operation to become a man, but eventually she finds out that she is happy with her sexuality and that she is actually a lesbian:

"... Soroush ran into the basement and yelled:

'Hurry! Reza's father is going to kill him!'

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<sup>102</sup> <https://jenseyatvajameh.files.wordpress.com/2008/07/banafshesafid.pdf>

I ran into the yard, I was so stressed that I didn't even put my *chador* (Islamic veil) on properly. The neighbours were gathering in front of Reza's home. I could hear a woman's voice; screaming and swearing and for a second I saw a hand, holding a kitchen knife, and two other hands which were holding onto it, forcing the hand to drop the knife.

'Leave me alone! Let me kill her! Spilling her blood is *Halal*! God knows it is *halal*!'

Neighbouring women were had opened their windows or were peeking behind their half-open doors. I wasn't sure if I should intervene or not. Until I saw Matin. I had a feeling that he must be Reza's friend, a thin guy, average height, with long hair and plucked eyebrows. He was wearing a coral shirt, light blue jeans, and his wrist and fingers displayed many bracelets and rings. Mahboubeh Khanoom, who was standing close to him, said out loud:

'It truly is a sign of Akhar-al-zaman (the end of times, final stages of human history before the day of judgement in Islamic teachings), that it is people like this who are filling this city with filth!'

....

I finally saw Reza, his lip was ripped open and from the wound; blood streamed onto his shirt. He had no shoes on and his shirt was torn. His brother, Hossein, was trying to shield him from their father's possible knife strokes. Suddenly Reza's mother's voice echoed in the alley:

'God! May I buy your tombstone myself! Why do you do this to us? Why can't you live like a human being? You worthless thing ... I did not bring you up with haram ... God! Who has cursed me to go through all this pain? I have brought up a whore! I wish I had strangled you to death in your sleep when you were still little!'

'Shut your mouth! Go inside'

Hossein's yell made his mother quiet while other men finally managed to take the knife from Reza's father were trying to force him back inside the house. One of the men said:

‘Why are you acting like this? This country has rules! Call the police instead, they’ll come and take them away, they’ll know what to do!’ ....”<sup>103</sup>

### **Final thought**

Due to the restrictions imposed by the Iranian state, the emerging Iranian LGBT literature has not yet found the chance to be publicised inside Iran legally. In recent years, as the internet became a means of mass communication in Iran, this gap has been filled to a certain extent. Several books and a number of short stories, which can be classified as LGBT or generally Queer literature, have been published and distributed via different mediums; the diaspora press and media, online publications and Iranian LGBT magazines. However, Iranian LGBT literature is only at the beginning of its journey. So far, the major works of the Iranian LGBT literature (the novels) have been generally innovative in form and content and this field of literature shows a promising future. There are also potential hazards that may threaten the success of Iranian LGBT literature such as the danger of becoming too isolated and not being able to engage with the Iranian or international literary community, which can result in the further marginalisation of the young and emerging Iranian LGBT literature. Thus the more that can be done to publicise this literature, the better.

I like to believe that this research has been a small step towards this goal. But I do recognise that it is far from comprehensive. I hope that this work can inspire future research in this field.

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<sup>103</sup> From Banafshey Sefid, *White Violate* (2013), p. 90:  
<https://jenseyatvajameh.files.wordpress.com/2008/07/banafshesafid.pdf>

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